Tail Biting Risk Factors in Pigs

Tail biting is a result of pigs experiencing stress. Stress can come from many sources & the risk factors can be different for each farm, which is why tail-biting can be hard to manage. When a pig experiences stress that they find difficult to cope with, tail biting is a reaction that often occurs. Usually it is an accumulation of stressors that cause an outbreak; this means that pigs can often cope with mild stress, but if a further stressor is added it can tip them over the edge into a tail biting outbreak. That’s why it is really important to minimise stress as much as possible, so that if there is an unexpected event, the pigs will be able to cope.

Pen & Environment
Temperature & air quality should be monitored closely. Ventilation controls should be adjusted were necessary to maintain optimal environmental conditions. Draughts can cause discomfort, so pens near doors or external walls could be more susceptible. A high standard of pen hygiene reduces the disease risk & possible infection if biting occurs & improves environmental comfort. All pen equipment should be checked regularly & required repairs done promptly. Fully slatted floors have been identified as a tail biting risk factor. Partially solid flooring provides pigs with a comfortable lying area & also allows provision of some rooting material.

Stocking Density
Pigs should be stocked at the legally required space allowance. In fact, stocking densities lower than this can reduce tail biting & improve growth rates. Appropriate stocking reduces competition at drinkers & feeders.

Social Stress
Mixing of pigs is a stressful event as it causes fighting. All-in all-out practices should be followed as much as possible & pigs only moved if absolutely necessary due to illness.

Feed & Water
Pigs like to feed together, so long trough systems are often used in countries which don’t dock pigs. Pigs require diets that are formulated to meet their nutritional requirements based on their age & stage. Disruption to the supply & quality of feed ingredients can result in stress & negative behaviours. All pigs should have permanent access to good quality water at an appropriate flow rate, from 2 weeks. Pipes should be cleaned & flow rates monitored regularly.

Environmental Enrichment
Pigs are highly motivated to perform exploratory behaviours. A lack of adequate enrichment can result in these behaviours being directed towards other pigs, particularly in times of stress. Enrichment is a legal requirement for all pigs, & used to give pigs something to explore & pass the time. Ideal materials are organic (e.g. wood, straw), chewable, destructible, & easily manipulated. Giving pigs a range of materials is ideal to keep them occupied.

Health
Good health is fundamental in reducing tail biting. Herd health plans should be regularly reviewed & followed. All sick animals should be promptly treated to reduce risk of tail biting. Pigs with bad bites should be separated, treated & allowed heal before returning to the pen.

Genetics
Producers sometimes report that they find particular genetic strains more likely to bite. It’s important to keep good records so that issues such as these can be quickly identified.