Respiratory disease is one of the most important issues affecting pig production worldwide, including in Ireland. Infections by the bacteria *Actinobacillus pleuropneumoniae* and *Mycoplasma hyopneumoniae* are a major concern for Irish farmers. These organisms are associated with lung lesions such as pleuritis and pneumonia, causing major losses both at farm level (decreased growth rate), and at factory level (increased time for carcass processing). Besides the economic losses, the unpredictability of disease creates uncertainty regarding production outputs, and greatly affects the welfare of the animals.

To control respiratory disease, pig farmers typically monitor herd disease status using serology (testing blood samples), where positive results indicate that the animals were previously exposed to a specific pathogen of interest, either by natural infection or by vaccination. Alternatively, on-farm necropsies and slaughterhouse inspections of pluck lesions (by examining lungs, heart, and liver) allow an investigation of the effects of disease and provide a rationale to conduct further herd diagnostics. Using these methods, Teagasc researchers investigated for the first time the prevalence of infection by four key respiratory pathogens: porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome virus (PPRSv); swine influenza virus (SIV); *Mycoplasma hyopneumoniae* (Mhyo); and, *Actinobacillus pleuropneumoniae* (APP) primary lesions at slaughterhouse (pleuritis, pneumonia, lung abscesses, and pericarditis), and their effects on production performance and medicine use.

**How many pigs did we look at?**
A total of 9,254 pigs and 1,792 blood samples from one-third of the pig farms in the country were examined and collected, respectively. All farms were enrolled in the Teagasc eProfitMonitor, from which production performance indicators were retrieved.

**What was the prevalence of disease and lesions at slaughter?**
The prevalence of SIV, PRRSv, Mhyo and APP in Ireland is reported in Figure 1, and is similar to or lower than the prevalence in other European countries. An average of 162 plucks (i.e., heart, liver and lung tissues) per farm were assessed and the national average prevalence for lesions observed is reported in Figure 2. Most of the lungs with pleuritis (>80%) had moderate to severe lesions, while the severity of pneumonia was mild, with an average of 6.2% (±3.88%) of lung surface affected.

**How do these results relate to on-farm performance?**
With the data collected at slaughter (serology and pluck lesions), and taking into account the vaccination protocols on each farm, the associations between disease status and key performance indicators for pig production were studied (Table 1).
Prevalence of respiratory pathogens in Irish pig farms

![Prevalence of four key respiratory disease pathogens in Irish pig farms. PRRSv: porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome virus; SIV: swine influenza virus; M hyo: Mycoplasma hyopneumoniae; APP: Actinobacillus pleuropneumoniae.](image1)

**Table 1: Effect of respiratory disease on farm performance of 56 farrow-to-finish pig farms.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Production performance indicators</th>
<th>How much of it was explained by respiratory disease?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weaner mortality</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finisher mortality</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. pigs sold per sow per year</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average daily feed intake</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average daily gain</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feed conversion ratio</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at sale</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respiratory disease greatly impacted on average daily feed intake, average daily gain and age at sale (or age at slaughter; see Table 1). This indicates that pigs on farms that had respiratory disease issues ate less, grew more slowly, and took more time to reach slaughter weight. The effect of respiratory disease on feed conversion ratio was relatively small. This result suggests that disease clearly affects the growth rate and feed intake of pigs. It does not necessarily make production less efficient in terms of feed use, but effects on pig welfare might be expected.

**Conclusions**

- Respiratory disease and vaccination information were able to explain a large proportion of key production performance indicators such as average daily feed intake, average daily gain and age at slaughter.
- Monitoring and control of respiratory disease are essential for improved farm efficiency.

Prevalence of lung and heart lesions

![Average prevalence of pleurisy, pneumonia, lung abscesses and pericarditis at slaughter in finisher pigs of 56 farrow-to-finish pig farms.](image2)

**Acknowledgements and funding**

The authors would like to particularly thank the Irish farmers, Teagasc advisors, veterinarians, and slaughterhouses who participated in the PSP project. This work was funded by the Teagasc FEED-STRAT Project (RMIS No. PDPG-0231-6666) and by the Irish Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine under the Research Stimulus Fund (PathSurvPig 14/S/832).

**Authors**

- Maria Costa
  Postdoctoral researcher, Pig Development Department, Teagasc Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Moorepark, Fermoy, Co. Cork
  Correspondence: maria.costa@teagasc.ie

- Edgar Garcia Manzanilla
  Head of Pig Development Department, Teagasc Animal & Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Moorepark, Fermoy, Co. Cork

- Finola Leonard
  Associate Professor, School of Veterinary Medicine, Veterinary Science Centre, University College Dublin