



Successful weaning of piglets – without antimicrobial use *Methods to prevent post weaning diarrhoea*

Context

In nature, sows would wean their piglets at the age of 13 – 17 weeks. However, in organic pig production in Switzerland, they are weaned at the earliest age of 6 weeks.

In conventional farming systems piglets are weaned even earlier, at the ages of 3 – 4 weeks.

This causes a significant disruption in the life of the piglet leading, among other things, to diarrhoea.

Recent analysis of antibiotics usage in organic pig farming in Switzerland showed that the weaning period is the most critical moment concerning antimicrobial use (AMU) for pigs. Around 6 % of all weaned piglets were treated with antibiotics during this period. The AMU is farm specific, leaving room for improvement.

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Keywords

Piglets, AMU, Animal health, Animal Handling

Problem & Solution

Reduce AMU in animal husbandry by improving the handling of weaning piglets

Outcome

To ease the weaning period, there are two different approaches. One is to mitigate all stress factors apart from the weaning itself while encouraging the piglets to eat solid food such as concentrate and roughage as early as possible. This approach leaves the piglets with a better-developed digestive system at weaning time. Stress factors that can be mitigated during weaning are, for example, a change of housing. This means that instead of removing the piglets from the sow in a new environment, the sow is removed, and the piglets can stay in their already-known surroundings. Leaving them only a few days longer in the farrowing pen post-weaning already makes a big impact.

Another possible way to achieve this is with a group suckling system. Thereby, the sows and the piglets are moved together to a bigger pen with other sows and their piglets after around two-three weeks after birth. At weaning time, when the sows are removed, the piglets already know their pen mates and surroundings. Furthermore, to prevent the piglets from being stressed by pathogens proper hygiene is essential.

The other significant possibility to reduce post-weaning diarrhoea is to extend the suckling period while also presenting solid feed from an early stage on. However, this comes with the disadvantage of a potential economic loss, when unable to inseminate the sow as early again.

Practical recommendations

- Start feeding sow together with piglets from the floor very early on.
- Don't move piglets to a new pen directly during weaning; only remove sow.
- Extend the suckling period. With every week, the risk of post-weaning diarrhoea is smaller.
- Keep high hygiene standards.
- The feed should be offered in several smaller portions with enough water during weaning.



Illustrations & Photos

In their known surroundings the piglets are at ease, even if they are not directly next to the sow.

Photo: Werner Hagmüller



In nature the piglets learn foraging by mimicking the sow. Photo: Dave Pape



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