

# PIG CARE

## Pig Physiology

The average lifespan of a factory or industrial-breed pig is six to ten years. These pigs are usually crosses between Yorkshires, Landrace, and Giant Whites, but other breeds are sometimes used as well. Many breeds currently found in industrial systems are hybrids. Because factory pigs are bred to become very large very quickly, leg issues and other health problems relating to their excessive weight are common and may reduce their lifespan by a few years.

Mature female pigs (“sows”) and mature male pigs (“boars” if uncastrated, “barrows” if castrated) generally weigh between 600 and 900 pounds, but they can weigh in excess of 1000 pounds. The normal body temperature for pigs ranges from 101.6 °F to 103.6 °F. Industrial pigs are much larger than wild pigs or those not used in factory farming.

## Nutritional Needs of Pigs

**Water.** Clean, fresh water — and lots of it — must always be available to your pigs. Because they tend to dirty their water quickly, lie down in large water tubs, and flip small water tubs, we recommend the use of a special automated pig waterer, available in some farm supply stores and catalogs. Automatic waterers will cut down on water waste and broken water containers. The best course is to pour a concrete pad and bolt the water unit directly to it. If this is not an option, a thick, pliable rubber pail is best (a playful pig easily destroys plastic bowls). If your pig constantly tips her water container, build a wooden frame around the pail and stake it into the ground. Pigs have very strong noses and can easily flip over even large, full tubs of water.

**Feed.** Pig feed can be purchased at most feed stores. Because pre-mixed pig feed is designed to promote fast growth and is generally made with antibiotics, hormones, and animal by-products, we highly recommend mixing your own, or, if you have only a few pigs, using potbellied pig feed. Using your own mixture is viable if you have enough pigs to go through a ton or more of feed every three to six weeks. Most feed mills will not mix smaller quantities. If you live in an area where fruits and vegetables are plentiful, you can also supplement their diet with fresh foods, but make sure you are giving them all the nutrients they need.

We feed our pigs about ten cups of our specially made pellets each per day in the summer, when pasture is available, and double that amount in winter. We vary the amount if we see them gaining or losing too much weight. Produce is a wonderful addition to your pigs’ diet, but make sure to control their overall caloric intake. If they are eating produce or pasture, reduce their pelleted feed rations to keep them from becoming obese. Pigs gain weight quickly when they have access to rich pasture so always monitor their weight and change feed amounts accordingly.

**Feeders.** Pigs have a tendency to flip over rubber or plastic bowls and use them as toys more often than feed holders. Nonetheless, such containers can be used for feeding as long as they are removed as soon as the pigs are done eating. Our shelters use 4- to 6-

foot-long metal troughs, one trough per three pigs. Always provide enough feeders to allow all of your pigs to eat at the same time. Locate your feeding area on a surface that can be cleaned easily and will not get muddy.

## Handling Pigs

Because pigs are very strong and dislike being restrained, handling them can be a challenge. When moving pigs, always push — never pull. *Never* use a steel snare on a pig. Doing so is not only cruel but is likely to make future handling more difficult. If your veterinarian insists on the use of a steel snare, you will need to show him how to use a rope snare.

A rope snare is slipped over the top snout and behind the top tusks, and the loose end is then tied to a heavy post. Because pigs tend to pull back when tied, a snared and secured pig will likely stay rooted in place, making it easier to work with her (she will, however, protest — and loudly!). When using a snare on a pig, *use a quick-release knot only*. If your pig panics or falls while on the snare, the quick release knot will allow you to remove the snare immediately and prevent injury.

## Shelter Requirements for Pigs

**Building.** A concrete-block building is ideal for pigs who have strong noses and often destroy wooden structures. The flooring should be slip-resistant and have some give. Dirt is best. Concrete is so hard on hooves and joints that it can lead to permanent injuries. Therefore, if your building has a concrete floor, it should be covered with five to six inches of dirt or with rubber mats (these, however, will make cleaning difficult).

Always provide your pigs with plenty of clean, dry straw for bedding. Pigs love to build nests to sleep in. Remove damp and soiled straw daily, replacing it with fresh. Spreading an odor reducer/deodorizer (such as Stall DRY) over wet areas will help keep the area dry. You can use wood shavings, but we have found that straw allows the pigs to nest, which is part of their instinctual behavior and something they really enjoy.

Your shelter should be waterproof and well ventilated, especially in warm weather. Pigs do not sweat and can suffer greatly in extreme heat. The use of mister fans in the summer is ideal for pigs, but areas where they sleep should be kept dry. Good ventilation is also crucial in the winter because humidity from urine, manure, and body moisture can cause horrible pneumonia outbreaks. Wet moist heat in a barn can lead to other issues such as yeast on the skin or other skin infections, so a properly ventilated barn is imperative.

Although a hot barn in winter is to be avoided, it is important to that your pigs are able to stay warm. With a concrete block barn, you can have the block cores filled, which provides some insulation. Insulating the roof is also a good idea — the heat put off by the pigs' bodies can help warm the area. A barn that is far too big for the number of pigs living there will be harder to keep warm and may result in having to use brooder lamps, which can be a fire hazard if not properly maintained. Ideally you want to keep their barn at 45 °F to 50 °F and always provide extra straw for burrowing in cold weather. If you do use brooder lamps, always secure them and their cords out of pigs' reach because the heat

from them can cause a fire. Also keep lamps clean because dust is combustible. Ceramic heat elements are safer than heat lamps with glass bulbs, which are easily broken. All in all, it is safest to provide a draft-free barn and lots of warm, soft, thick bedding and not use supplemental heat. The very safest way to heat a barn is radiant floor heating with dirt on top. This, however, is extremely expensive.

**Fencing.** In addition to adequate shelter, pigs need a fenced-in paddock. Many types of fencing are suitable for pigs. Four-foot-high “no climb” horse fencing and hog panels are both good options. The fence should have no gap at the bottom so that pigs will not be tempted to root under it. Fencing should be fitted all the way to the ground and installed securely to posts to prevent pigs from warping it. We also add corral boards for support, with the wood on the outside so that pigs cannot chew it.

**Pasture.** We recommend providing one acre of land for every two pigs. Pigs love grass, but they will root up the area, turning over a large portion of the soil. Good drainage is essential to prevent the entire paddock from turning into a mud pit. We recommend having two pastures so that if one gets muddy, the pigs can be moved to the other until the first dries out. For warm weather, pigs’ outdoor habitat must have plenty of shade. An area that is half wooded and half pasture is ideal.

Pigs love water, and, because they cannot sweat, we recommend providing a pond and a mud hole/wallow. Mud is also very important as a sunscreen, so if your area gets lots of hot sunshine, a mud hole will be much more beneficial to your pigs than a pond. If you have a pasture that has a wet area, this is most likely where the pigs will make their mud hole. If your pigs do not have access to mud during the sunnier times of year, we recommend applying sunscreen.

## Pig Health Care and Maintenance

**Maintenance.** Pigs are among the most difficult farm animals to care for because their breeding predisposes them to a slew of ailments. Health problems can be greatly reduced, however, by consistently providing sanitary housing, clean pasture, strict diets, fresh water, and plenty of time outside.

During your daily contact with your pigs, watch for any physical or behavioral changes. Symptoms of sickness in pigs include poor appetite, weakness or staggering, lethargy, labored breathing, skin changes or abscesses, and abnormal temperature. Being down during the day when other pigs are up and active or spending a lot of time alone can also be signs of a problem. You should consult your veterinarian immediately if you notice any of these symptoms (although a good pig vet is hard to find).

Pigs, especially elderly ones with limited mobility, need their hooves trimmed every two months, although some pigs require more frequent trimming and others require trimming only a few times a year (more active pigs). Learn what a pig’s foot is supposed to look like and make sure that you are keeping it trimmed well because foot infections, which often start with hoof problems, can be fatal in pigs. A horse hoof nipper (available through most of the catalogs below) works well on pig hooves. Ask your veterinarian or

someone with experience to demonstrate how to perform this procedure. Male pigs also need their bottom tusks trimmed every three to six months. This is important because tusks can cause severe injury to others during play and normal daily activities. Use specialized wire tusk trimmers, also called “giggly wire” or “saw wire,” which are available through the catalogs below. This procedure requires two people. As with hoof trimming, it is best to receive instructions from an experienced caregiver or vet before attempting to trim tusks yourself.

## Common Health Issues of Pigs

**Upper Respiratory Problems/Pneumonia.** Pigs, like humans, are susceptible to colds, flu viruses, and pneumonia, particularly if their shelter is drafty or muggy or if they’re exposed to rapid temperature changes. Symptoms include loss of appetite, listlessness, coughing, and discharge from the eyes and nose. A fever may also be present for a couple of days. The best course is always prevention, which includes proper ventilation, temperature control, and isolation of new arrivals until they have a clean bill of health. Because most forms of pneumonia in pigs are contagious, it is critical to isolate any pigs who display symptoms of upper respiratory infection. Pneumonia can be fatal, so you should consult your veterinarian if you observe these symptoms.

**Limping/Arthritis/Hoof Infections.** Due to their abnormally large weight, many domestic pigs suffer from stiff and sore joints, and they can easily injure their legs, feet, and hooves. If your pig is limping, check for debris caught in the hoof, cracks in the hoof, or any heat or swelling from the foot up to the top of the leg. If the limping continues for more than a few days, consult your veterinarian. Causes of limping in pigs include nutritional imbalances; foot, joint, or leg infections caused by trauma or bacteria; degeneration of bones and joints; arthritis; and ingestion of toxins. Multiple types of arthritis are common among pigs, and diagnosing the type is important for treatment. Infections in feet, bones, and joints also have multiple causes and should be diagnosed by a vet before a treatment is chosen. Pigs are prone to infections in the hoof that quickly spread into the bones of the feet. Catching these infections early is essential because, once an infection is in the bone, surgery is often the only option and does not always work.

**Lice and Mange.** A pig infected with lice or mange will scratch almost constantly and act restless. Mange mites cannot be seen with the naked eye, but they are evident through the presence of red, scaly, scabby areas with hair loss. Your vet can do a skin scraping to determine whether your pig has mange. Lice and lice eggs are visible without a microscope, so a skin scraping is not necessary to diagnose this kind of infestation. Sarcoptic mange is a reportable condition and is highly contagious to people and all other mammals on the farm, including dogs and cats. If your pig develops a skin infection or rash, wear gloves and do not allow others to touch the pig until you have determined the cause.

Lice and mange can be treated topically with powders and sprays available at farm supply stores or through your veterinarian. Other parasite medications, such as ivermectin, can be given orally or by injection. Since ivermectin can cause tissue damage, the injectable

form must be given subcutaneously. You should ask your veterinarian to show you how to administer it before attempting to do so yourself. Even with an experienced person, there can still be large abscesses and areas of dead tissue. We prefer to use Ivermectin horse gel or paste because of the difficulty of administering sub-Q injections to pigs.

**Internal Parasites.** Although good sanitation will greatly reduce worm problems, you should still have your pigs checked regularly for worms. Have a stool sample checked by your veterinarian every three to six months and then administer treatment accordingly. Isolate any incoming pigs until a fecal exam can be done and any parasites are treated. As with medications for external parasites, we suggest using oral worming products because injections are far more difficult to administer and more stressful to the pig.

**Heat Exhaustion.** Pigs suffer greatly from the heat, mostly because of their inability to sweat and their large size. Providing a mud hole, a pond, and fans will help keep them cool. Symptoms of heat exhaustion include elevated temperature (above 103 °F–106 °F), weakness, muscle tremors, labored breathing, lethargy, staring, vomiting, and collapse. If you notice any of these symptoms, contact your veterinarian immediately and cool off the pig as quickly as possible.

There are several ways to reduce your pig's temperature: hose her down with cool water; apply cold packs around the neck and chest and between the back legs; or apply rubbing alcohol to the feet, back, and legs. Have gallons of alcohol available when you have pigs in areas where the outside temperature is over 85 °F because, with overexertion, pigs can easily suffer from heat exhaustion. Be sure to move your pig out of direct sunlight; if she cannot be moved, set up a temporary shade shelter with tarps or sheets. Veterinarians may recommend that you give your pig a cold-water enema; however this will prevent you from getting an accurate body temperature.

Some pigs suffer from PSS (porcine stress syndrome). This genetic condition can cause your pig to act like he or she is experiencing a heat stroke. Pigs with PSS can easily die when stressed or when anesthetized for even minor surgical procedures.

**Skin Cancer.** Squamous cell carcinoma is very common in pigs, especially among such breeds as Yorkshires and Landrace, which have been bred to have pale skin. Signs of skin cancer usually appear first on the skin behind the ears but may also affect the shoulders, the back, and even the abdominal area. We recommend that, during the spring, summer, and fall, you apply sunscreen to all areas on your pigs not covered in mud. Sun exposure is rarely in issue in winter, except in very warm climates.

The above are the most common ailments we have observed in pigs. There are, however, many other conditions that can affect them. We recommend consulting your veterinarian whenever you notice unusual behavior or physical changes.

### Pig Behavior Problems

Pigs are very territorial animals, and putting new pigs in an already existing area can be very complicated and will involve fighting. Young piglets are more easily introduced to a

herd of adults, but careful oversight is necessary to ensure that they are not injured by the large pigs. Adult pigs will fight with every herd resident to establish their place in the pecking order. This is not something you can control or prevent, but you do not want the newcomer or any resident pig to suffer serious injury. The use of pig boards to break up fights is helpful, but you can easily get hurt. Before attempting to put pigs together, consult with someone who is experienced in pig handling. There are also products on the market, such as Pig Pax, which are unpleasant-tasting liquids that are rubbed on the pig to deter others from biting them. These are not guarantees against confrontations — much depends on the personalities of the pigs in the herd. Often new pigs are forced out of the barn, so be sure they have a safe place to sleep outside if necessary. Do not introduce pigs when it is hot because fighting will lead to overheating.

### Bringing New Pigs In

When pigs arrive, unless they come from another sanctuary that has already treated them and given them a clean bill of health, they must be isolated in a strict quarantine area, and caretakers should wear coveralls or ISO suits and boot covers. If animals are in really bad shape, do not spread their straw bedding on your pastures; instead, pile it in a separate area on the farm until fecal tests, skin scrapings, etc. are complete. If females are present, make emergency appointments immediately upon arrival for spays/pregnancy checks to avoid unwanted births. Neuter any males immediately after all spays are complete, and separate all males and females if intact males are present.

- Pigs should be checked for skin problems, and, if there is any sign of external parasites or bacterial disease, get a scraping immediately and treat accordingly.
- Treat all pigs immediately with Ivermectin unless they are very weak. Take in a fecal sample as soon as possible.
- Check for overgrown hooves and overgrown tusks and trim as needed. If a pig is aggressive or frightened of people and poses a real risk to caregivers or to the pig, wait until it has calmed down before attempting to do trimming. If the animal is aggressive and cannot be handled safely, a vet can anesthetize the pig to allow the trimming to be done.
- Check joints for swelling and heat. Check feet for abscesses/infections and treat all accordingly.
- If pigs show any signs of discharge from their eyes or noses, cultures should be taken by a vet.
- If pigs are coughing and show signs of pneumonia, have a vet check them and start treatment.
- Check manure and, if loose stool is found, have a bacterial culture run and treat the pig or pigs accordingly.
- Keep pigs isolated for a minimum of 30 days or longer if there are any signs of health problems.
- Pigs should undergo a complete health check within two days of their arrival. If they are calm and seem healthy, this should be done immediately.
- Once the pigs are ready for introduction, they should be housed in a pen within the main pig area for at least a few weeks before they are put in with other pigs. They will need to be monitored closely at this time and any fighting broken up

before injuries occur. Do not introduce pigs on hot days because they are prone to heat stroke and stress.

- Be very careful around pigs you do not know. A scared pig can be very dangerous and, depending on the handling they have experienced, pigs can also be aggressive. Observe pigs carefully before approaching them. If a pig is chomping his jaws, stay away from him and consult a vet who knows pig behavior.

### Resources for Pig Care

Please note: Many of the catalogs listed contain products commonly used in animal agriculture. Unfortunately, there are no farm catalogs that list only cruelty-free items.

Omaha Vaccine Company: PO Box 7228, Omaha, NE 68107; phone: 800-367-4444

Nasco Farm & Ranch: 901 Janesville Ave., Fort Atkinson, WI 53538-0901; phone: 800-558-9595

Valley Vet Supply: PO. Box 504, Marysville, KS 66508; phone: 800-468-0059