

Managing pain in our pigs

T A stockman or woman's resilience is strong and painful niggles are often ignored in order to get the job done. A farmer's tolerance is expected to be high, a 'Keep Calm and Carry On' attitude is commended. But should we expect this from our pigs?

A As keepers of animals, we try to reduce risk of them experiencing diseases and conditions that will cause pain. Many vaccinate against diseases and buy in pigs with a high health status. We maintain a low stress environment, for example by teeth clipping and tail docking only when necessary to prevent further and more severe pain later, and we house and manage pigs with an aim to reduce contamination and increase safety of their environment. In an ideal world these efforts would be enough and subsequently pigs would not need pain relief. However, pigs are livestock and it is currently unrealistic to expect that pain will never be experienced by any of our pigs. Look at a population of people for example. In 1000 people, how many do you expect would be suffering from disease or injury that causes some kind of pain?

L Pain, mild or severe, is bad for animal welfare and can dramatically decrease growth by slowing feed intake and diverting precious energy to healing rather than growing muscle mass. There is no reason to believe that pigs don't feel pain in the same way that we do, so until we have better pain markers for pigs, we are probably safe to make assumptions based on 'if I were this pig, would I be in pain?'. Lameness and open wounds like tail bites are quite obviously painful, and other conditions like meningitis would benefit from the anti-inflammatory component of some medication your vet can prescribe.

K Traditionally, we define pig pain relief as giving an injection of a pain killer. Every medication costs money on face value and pigs are notoriously difficult to inject. However, as prey animals, pigs are generally regarded as very stoic, except when it comes to restraining them! Quite often when we post-mortem a pig we are astounded at the interior damage present in pigs that have been walking around normally just hours prior.

S So, what kind of medications can your vet prescribe to relieve pain in pigs? We can prescribe a variety of anti-inflammatory medication. Pain is often caused by pressure, so by decreasing inflammation less pressure is put on structures that would send pain signals to the brain. To do this we can use a steroid or a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug like meloxicam (Metacam) or ketoprofen (Ketofen). Your vet can discuss with you when these medicines are appropriate. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs block a hormone that causes pain, decrease inflammation and lower a fever. Possible side effects include kidney disease and stomach ulcers so recommended dose should not be exceeded and they should only be given in circumstances that your vet has prescribed their use. Metacam is also available orally which can be useful when pig keepers are not happy to inject pigs. If a group of animals are affected by pain or fever and separated into one pen, we can also water medicate with a pig specific paracetamol.

H We can also affect pain by removing an infectious cause, by using an antibiotic. Antibiotics must be used responsibly and reserved only for bacterial infections. It is often indicated to use an antibiotic alongside an anti-inflammatory drug so that the cause (bacteria) and result (inflammation) of an infection is removed and the animal can improve more quickly. A spray barrier like antibiotic blue spray or aluminium spray can also be helpful to minimise bacteria infecting open wounds.

O As well as giving medication, we can also use management practices to help relieve pain. A lame pig would likely appreciate a deep bed of straw leading right up to their water and food source so that they don't have to step onto hard concrete to eat and drink. A pig with a rectal prolapse would likely appreciate being away from other inquisitive pigs who might have a rather painful nibble. All 'sick pigs' need access to feed and water and assisted to drink if they are not able to. This, in short, describes our hospital pen which is a Red Tractor requirement.

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When unacceptable pain is experienced or if pain is prolonged for an unacceptable length of time a decision is made to euthanase. This is the ultimate way to end pain in an animal.

Quite often, several methods are appropriate to manage pain. For example, in the case of a tail bite an antibiotic would decrease the risk of a painful spinal abscess forming, a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug like Metacam would decrease pain and inflammation, and a barrier spray would promote healing of the open wound.

A case-by-case approach should be used to decide how a pig's pain could be best managed or whether euthanasia is the most appropriate action. As you have read, there are many different and varied methods to manage pain, not all of which are injecting a pig! Your vet will be happy to discuss this with you and can receive your videos and images remotely to give advice on a more singular animal basis than what can often be achieved with quarterly vet visits.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Claire Scott". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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