What are the welfare issues with tail biting and tail docking in pigs?

Tail biting and tail docking are major welfare concerns for pigs, particularly for those kept in barren intensive housing. Most piglets housed in these systems have their tails docked within days of birth to prevent tail biting later in life.

What is tail biting?

Tail biting is a behaviour whereby pigs use their teeth to bite and chew other pigs’ tails. It is a significant welfare problem in commercial pig production. Tail biting can lead to injuries in the victim, and the victim can experience pain and fear, which can be exacerbated in an outbreak where pigs performing the biting can target victims with persistency, and the problem can spread throughout a group. Tail biting can also be associated with a variety of conditions including spinal abscesses, septicaemia, and a reduced growth rate.

Tail biting is affected by a number of factors, and is thought to predominantly occur in barren environments, as the need to perform exploration and foraging behaviours are considered a major underlying motivation.

What is tail docking?

Tail biting on commercial farms has led to the widespread adoption of tail docking. While it is a common management practice to prevent tail biting, it causes acute trauma and pain since the tail has lots of nerves. There is evidence that tail docking causes piglets to struggle, scream, and clamp their tails between their hind limbs, indicating that it is likely highly aversive. Further, pigs which have had their tails docked may experience long-term pain, and may render tail-docked pigs susceptible to infection.

Tail docking reduces the frequency of tail biting but does not completely eliminate it, and does not address the underlying causes.

In the European Union, tail docking on a routine basis has been prohibited, and there is further legislation limiting its use in countries including Denmark, Sweden, and Finland. In Australia, the Model Code of Practice suggests that where tail docking is performed as a routine preventative measure, it should be carried out before pigs are 7 days of age.

The RSPCA is opposed to the docking of the tails of any species of animal unless under veterinary advice to improve an individual animal’s health, and the RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme Standards - Pigs do not permit tail docking.

Methods to address tail biting and alternatives to tail docking

Although multifactorial, one of the main factors which contributes to the incidence of tail biting is a barren environment and the inability for pigs to perform exploration and foraging behaviour. In order to reduce the incidence of tail biting, pigs should be provided with an environment that provides appropriate stimulation and satisfies their motivation to explore and chew, such as the provision of straw. Good stockpersonship and a good pig-to-stockperson ratio are essential to abate tail biting.

Hazards for tail biting include an absence of straw bedding, high stocking density, inadequate diet, competition for resources, poor health status, season, air quality and speed, and stress. In addition to this, the heritability of tail biting has been found to be high enough for genetic selection against the behaviour. Genetic selection may therefore be a promising route to addressing tail biting.

Since tail biting can cause very poor welfare and tail docking is painful both in the short and long term, measures other than tail docking should be implemented to control tail biting.
References

European Food Safety Authority (2007) Scientific Report on the risks associated with tail biting in pigs and possible means to reduce the need for tail docking considering the different housing and husbandry systems. The EFSA Journal 611:1-98.


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