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Diseases of Baby Pigs

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The diseases which affect baby pigs are the same as those which also affect older swine. However, when baby pigs are affected the disease is frequently much more severe. The baby pig does not have the reserve to withstand a prolonged infection and is dependent on the continuous supply of milk for energy. When this milk supply is lost by vomition or when the pig refuses to eat, then the disease rapidly gains control. Other organisms which are usually non-infective also begin to multiply and because of the weakened condition brought about by the disease these secondary organisms begin to invade other organs and enhance the disease.

Under most conditions the sow will have antibody in the colostrum or first milk which will protect the pigs from disease. However, the sow will not have antibody to diseases which she has not experienced or for which she has not been immunized. Consequently pigs nursing these sows are not protected and, if infected, will experience the disease. An example of a disease of this type is transmissible gastroenteritis or TGE. If the sow has experienced the disease her pigs will not get TGE as long as they are nursing her, but if the pigs are removed from the sow and do not get her milk they will be susceptible to the virus. In the case of sows immunized for hog cholera the baby pigs get the antibody in the colostrum during the first day of feeding. This antibody will protect the pig from hog cholera for 4 to 8 weeks. Then the pig again becomes susceptible and must be vaccinated to be protected.

Many bacteria and what appears to be large viral agents do not stimulate good antibody production in either the sow or the baby pig. For control of organisms of this type good management with isolation to prevent infection, adequate housing, and complete rations are essential. Under these conditions good management together with a program of preventive medicine can do much to increase the number and weight of pigs weaned.

It has been shown that the heavier pigs at birth have a much lower average mortality. In one study, pigs weighing 2.5 to 3.0 lb. had an average mortality of 25% or about the same as the national average. Pigs weighing over 3.0 lb. at birth had a 17% mortality and those under 2.0 lb. had a 36% mortality rate.

This effect of the increased weight at birth is also shown at two weeks, weaning and at 140 days. Good growing pigs can nearly triple their birth weight by two weeks, here again the heavier pig gains a weight advantage which will carry on through weaning. It has also been shown that a five-pound weight advantage at eight weeks of age will increase to 12 lb. at 140 days of age. This means these pigs can be marketed a week or so earlier than the lighter weaning pigs. Any saving in time, of course, is also a saving in feed and labor costs.

Good management during gestation and farrowing can do much to reduce or prevent diseases which will result in weaning more and heavier pigs. Practices which can influence production are clean, sterilized farrowing houses; control of traffic to farrowing house; farrowing house size limited so that all litters will farrow within a few days; separate housing for pigs of different age groups; and the practice of preventive medicine and sanitary measures throughout farrowing and growing period. If one has good breeding stock, adequate nutrition, a program of preventive medicine and vaccination, together with sound management, the problems of raising market pigs can be greatly reduced.