

Keeping pigs with long tail is possible

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Is it possible to keep pigs with long tails? Yes, it is - however, two questions have to be raised in this context:

- First, which prerequisites have to be fulfilled to increase the chance to manage pigs with long tails without biting and being bitten until the end of the finishing period?
- and, second, is it possible to maintain a continuous success, meaning that batch after batch is able to reach this goal without any setbacks in form of batches with a high occurrence of tail-biting?

With regard to prerequisites, recommendations are as numerous as identified possible risk factors for tail-biting. Up to now, the number of factors with scientifically proven impact on tail biting sums up to over 80. Tail-docking is an effective procedure to prevent tail biting, however, banned in the EU since 1994 as a routine measure. In most EU-countries, it is the responsibility of the farm veterinarian to issue a certificate for individual special permits to tail-dock in cases of documented needs.

Documented needs include that tail-biting is still present after the provision of enrichment material, adequate space and the optimization of other influencing factors. As EU countries are implementing national action plans to enforce the legal ban of tail-docking, keeping pigs with intact tails has to be put into practice, and the on-farm requirements for this are increasingly growing in importance.

Experiences have shown that it is nearly impossible to start simply keeping pigs with long tails in the same way tail-docked pigs were kept before, without taking appropriate preventive measures. In most husbandry systems in Europe, the environmental stimuli for pigs are insufficient. In combination with additional adverse factors, e.g. a lack of appropriate feed and water, or bad microclimate, the pigs become overstrained and stressed, resulting in mutilating behavior such as tail biting.

Summarizing scientific results and practical solutions on farm level, improvements in following categories result in major benefits for health and welfare of pigs with long tails:

- space allowance: avoid overcrowding
- housing system: structure, floor, cleanliness, places of retreat
- occupation via enrichment material: sufficient, appropriate and organic material without health risks
- (micro-)climate: good air quality, temperature and humidity
- feed: enough, high quality, fibre, adequate access
- water: enough, high quality, adequate access
- animal health: proper vaccine management, good health status, biosecurity, starting from the farrowing farm
- social structures: known pen mates, decreased competition
- human contact/caretakers: routine animal observations, "animal signals", early detection of irregularities, analyzing aetiology
- emergency plan: provision of enrichment material, separation
- hospital pens: for biters and victims, implementation of curative measures.

If achieved the goal of keeping pigs with tails, the biggest challenge is to maintain this success batch after batch. Even if all mentioned factors were optimized, the role of others, such as genetics, is still unknown, and therefore, a long-term success is never guaranteed, but should be sought.