

Zero Tolerance Drug Testing– What Does It Mean?

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I hope that for anyone in the show pig industry, the title of this article catches your attention. No one wants their show pig to drug test positive at a show. We do not need this negative publicity adversely affecting all of the positive qualities that are gained from showing animals. This is a topic that I feel affects every one of us, from the show pig producer, to the family showing pigs at the major shows, to the veterinarian involved in the care of those animals. I do not intend to have all the answers on this subject, but what I hope will transpire, is to start some conversation about what we, as an industry can do, to keep our animals healthy, and comfortable yet able to pass a drug test.

Showing pigs is a privilege that we should never take for granted. It is imperative that as an industry, we protect what we love the most. Whether you show for the sheer joy of competition, or whether it is your livelihood, this industry still has a responsibility to the consumer of pork products, that what is bought in the store is drug free. There are many steps and programs in place to assure that drug residues do not show up in your pork chops you fix for dinner. Withdrawl times for all medications should be followed exactly, and drugs that are illegal or not approved in food animals should **NEVER** be used. Our duty is to protect the consumer so that they can be guaranteed a product they can trust. Extensive testing and research must be done by drug companies to have their medications approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). These medications include antibiotics, anti-inflammatory/pain medications, and vaccines. The FDA then determines what the withdrawl times are so the products are safe for the food supply. The FDA also has an extensive list of medications that have been proven to not be safe or approved for use in food animals because of the residues that are harmful to humans if ingested. Following these rules and regulations can indeed be difficult at times, however, it is critical that we abide by these guidelines set by the FDA. In addition to the

FDA regulations that are in place, another great safeguard that educates everyone in the pork industry is the Pork Quality Assurance Program, or the PQA. Parents, exhibitors, and producers are required to be certified in PQA. This is a wonderful program because it teaches proper care of the animal as well as protection of the food supply. PQA also educates as to what a veterinary/client relationship looks like, record keeping, and proper administration and withdrawal times of drugs. Whether exhibitors ever become involved directly in agriculture, they can still be advocates for the industry knowing how the safeguards that are in place, work. The role of the veterinarian is also key in this process. Since many of the medications used to treat our animals are prescription only, they must be dispensed by a veterinarian. We must all work together to ensure that our pork industry, whether that is showing, or commercial, stays in a positive light regarding the ethical treatment and outcome for our animals. This may be easier said, than done however, when it comes to drug testing.

Zero tolerance drug testing has me very concerned for the future of the show pig industry and the public's perception of what actually happens within our show rings and at home. Zero tolerance is the time that it takes for **all** drug residues to be eliminated from the body. Withdrawl time is the period of time that must pass after a medication has been given for the meat to be determined safe for consumption by humans. However, these two definitions very often do not match. As you can guess, the elimination period in most cases, is longer than the labeled withdrawal time. The FDA has determined what withdrawal times are for each specific medication and that is clearly stated on a drug label. However, no such elimination time on the label exists. So it is very possible to have followed the label withdrawal times, but an animal will still test positive for a medication under the zero tolerance plan. I have reviewed the guidelines from many shows about how to avoid drug residues, and they all come back to the same statement, "consult your veterinarian". Obviously, not a helpful answer for any one. As we all know, injuries and illnesses happen, often near the time of a show. Many times, we would still be outside that window of the withdrawal time for a medication to help the animal make a full recovery before the show.

However, because of the zero tolerance policy, I have to advise my clients that if treated, there is a chance their pig could test positive at the show even though we are following the rules set by the FDA. So we have to choose between treating and helping the animal recover but risk the stigma and loss of a win because of a positive drug test, or not to treat the animal who is then suffering and not getting the appropriate care. Neither choice is good. Not only does the suffering animal bother me, but my bigger concern is when the treated animal tests positive even though the withdrawal times were followed, and then the public finds out but only sees one side of the issue. This is a serious problem since all the consumer hears is that there was a drug used in an animal that was “illegal”. What they don’t hear is that withdrawal times were adhered to and the meat would have been perfectly safe to be consumed.

I am not naïve, and I know we do not live in a perfect world. I know that withdrawal times are not always followed. I know non-approved medications are used and I know people cheat and always will. I do know that I believe testing should be done to protect the integrity of the shows and make the playing field even for everyone. My concern is that we may have not found the best system to do that yet. I took an oath as a veterinarian to prevent animal suffering. With zero tolerance testing, I am not able to keep that oath. We must find a testing protocol which allows us to still treat our animals as needed, stay within the FDA guidelines, and still test negative at shows. There are some alternative non-medicine treatments which we will explore in future articles. I don’t claim to have all the answers, but for now, we all need to be advocates for our industry. We need to ask the hard questions and try to find solutions that will make our show industry the best it can be for everyone.