

Keeping Your Show Pig Healthy....Without Antibiotics

I am sure the title of this article is a little disturbing to some families. The scary part is that this may become a reality in the very near future. For as long as most of us can remember, there have been antibiotics in the feed we give our pigs. We go to the feed store, get a bag of feed and assume there is an antibiotic in it that will keep our pigs healthy. In this article I will explain why we all have had a false sense of security when it comes to this topic and what I know we can do to keep our pigs healthy and not rely on antibiotics.

One of the most exciting times for show families is going out and purchasing the next set of pigs. At this point, they all have a chance to be a winner. We all know pigs need fresh water, fresh air, feed and a clean dry pen. One thing we often don't think about until it's too late is how do we keep our pigs healthy right from the start so they can reach their full genetic potential. So, what is the most important thing we can do to keep our pigs healthy? Vaccinate them as soon as we get them home. In many cases, the breeder will have given your pig some vaccines, but it is important to know which ones were given and when because not all pigs respond to vaccines in the same way or in the same time frame when they are given. I feel that it is critical to revaccinate your pigs once you have them home. My family and several of my clients have been doing this with our pigs for several years and our pigs stay very healthy throughout the duration of the show season.

The major causes of respiratory disease in show pigs are Porcine Reproductive and Respiratory Syndrome (PRRS), Influenza (Flu) and Mycoplasma. PRRS and Flu are both viral infections, while Mycoplasma is a bacterial infection. However, Mycoplasma can act like a viral infection as well. The key to understanding these three conditions is that they are easy to prevent, but very difficult to treat. There are excellent commercial vaccines that when given at the appropriate time can help prevent your pig from getting sick from these infections. There are many commercial products available and I would be happy to consult on exact protocols

on an individual basis, however, I am not going to try and discuss those in this article.

These three respiratory diseases can occur alone or in any combination of 2 or all 3. These infections will not only make pigs sick, but they can set them up for acquiring other secondary bacterial infections as well. Once the pig shows clinical signs of being sick, it can be difficult to treat because viruses **DO NOT** respond to antibiotics. We give antibiotics to control only the secondary infections and to hopefully keep the pig from getting sicker. This is why when our pig is coughing and we give antibiotics, the cough does not always go away. The antibiotic is not treating the viral infection. If we give the pig an antibiotic and an anti-inflammatory, the pig will hopefully feel better, but it may take several days to recover and for the cough to actually go away. In some severe cases of viral/mycoplasma infections, the pig cannot fully recover and may die or have chronic lung damage. Often, we want to keep giving antibiotics in hopes the pig will recover, but that is a misuse of the drug with potential consequences that lead to antibiotic resistance and possibly of the drug being pulled from the market for purchase. We must use antibiotics correctly and judiciously so we do not lose the privilege of having them available for our use.

As you may know the rules for use of antibiotics in the feed are changing January 1st 2017. At that time, you will need a Veterinary Feed Directive or VFD to get antibiotics in the feed. This is like a prescription from your veterinarian. There are specific rules as to how these can be written. In some situations it may be difficult or even impossible to get a VFD. Also, many water and injectable medications that were once over-the-counter will now be prescription too. The rules are changing. We can argue if this is good or bad but the fact is, antibiotics will be much more difficult to get, especially for the family with only a small number of pigs. I feel very strongly that this is an excellent time for all of us, from show pig producers, to show families to veterinarians to take a look at what we are doing with regards to herd health, and how medications are used. We have the opportunity to make this industry better. I have seen what can happen when pigs are properly vaccinated at the producer's farm and then revaccinated at the show family's home. It is amazing. The need for antibiotics can be eliminated!!

This is true. I have seen it first hand in my own family's pigs and in numerous clients' herds. Proper use of vaccines in the beginning will mean less injecting and medicating of pigs during the show season. I am often asked the question "what antibiotic do you give before you go to a show" I can confidently answer NONE. If your pigs are properly vaccinated the need for antibiotics will be greatly reduced. We are dealing with animals and nothing is 100%. Some pigs will still get sick, but they are much more likely to recover if they are well vaccinated.

This is a topic I feel very strongly about. I encourage each one of you to work with a veterinarian to develop a vaccine plan for your pigs as soon as they arrive at your barn. This will benefit both you and your pigs. Proper use of antibiotics and a good vaccine protocol will produce healthy pigs that can reach their genetic potential and have a better chance of making the show ring. That is a "win" for everyone.