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Teeth Clipping — Have You Tried to Quit?

Duane E. Reese
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Summary and Implications

Results from several experiments were reviewed to collect information on the value of piglet “needle-teeth” clipping. The incidence of facial and udder lesions generally is increased when teeth are left intact. However, there is no evidence that these lesions affect piglet mortality or weaning weight. Thus, based on the conditions of these experiments, there is no strong justification for teeth clipping. Many producers have abandoned teeth clipping. Besides saving labor, they report having fewer poor-doing piglets and joint infections that can result from teeth clipping. Some producers have tried to stop clipping, but because of greasy pig disease problems they have resumed. Producers who have not tried to stop clipping are advised to clip only half of the litters in a few farrowing groups and observe for possible problems.

Introduction

Pork producers in the USA and other countries used to routinely clip piglets’ “needle-teeth.” However, due to a variety of factors, including, for example, regulatory action in Denmark, fewer piglets have their teeth clipped today. This paper will review the literature and report recent producer experience with teeth clipping to clarify the issue for producers who continue to teeth clip.

Research Summary on Clipping

Piglets are born with eight sharp, completed erupted “needle teeth” that they use to establish “ownership” over one or more teats. In the process of fighting for a position on the udder they may lacerate the face of littermates (Figure 1) and sow’s udder.

Facial lesions

Several studies show that leaving teeth intact results in more piglet facial lesions. One group of British researchers using 550 piglets in 49 litters indicated the facial wounds they observed were relatively superficial and due to the lack of any ill effects on piglet health, weight gain or survival, questioned the importance of the wounds. Facial injury scores averaged 0.31 and 0.03 (0 = no wounds and 3 = several wounds) during the course of lactation for intact-teeth and clipped litters, respectively in that study. Using the same scoring system, another group of British researchers using 30 litters, reported facial injury scores averaged 0.37 and 0.10 for intact-teeth and clipped litters, respectively. There was a statistical difference between the injury score means in these studies; however, the low scores in the intact-teeth groups indicate the wounds were minor. Another study in Michigan that examined 318 litters found that during the first three days of life facial lesions were nearly twice as severe in litters with intact-teeth as in litters with clipped teeth, but lesions were only about 10%

more severe in clipped litters at 13 days of age.

In contrast, facial lesions in the intact-teeth group monitored by Canadian researchers were severe enough to warrant removing nine out of 19 litters from their experiment.

Udder damage

The effect of intact teeth on udder laceration or damage rate is small according to two studies. In the UK, scientists reported mean udder injury scores (0 = no wounds and 3 = several wounds) for sows nursing intact-teeth litters averaged 0.05 over the course of a 21-day lactation period vs. 0.03 for those nursing clipped litters. Canadian researchers reported only one of 170 sows (0.6%) they used in the intact-teeth treatment group had lacerations on the udder. One hundred and twenty-five of the 170 sows (74%) nursed between nine and 14 piglets, an indication of the degree of competition at the udder in this study.

Weight gain and mortality

Despite the occurrence of facial and udder wounds, there



Figure 1. Facial laceration caused by needle-teeth.



Figure 2. Infected mouth from teeth clipping.

are no reports of decreased pre-weaning weight gain or increased mortality due to intact needle teeth. In the Michigan study, nursing growth rates were similar between pigs with clipped or intact-teeth, and pre-weaning mortality was actually lower among pigs with intact-teeth that were nursing first-litter sows or those of parity six or greater.

Selective teeth clipping

Canadian researchers concluded that piglets use their needle teeth to compete against littermates for milk and other resources. Therefore, selective teeth clipping may be an effective approach to improving the competitive ability of low-birth weight piglets. A total of 346 litters were assigned to either a control group where all piglets had their teeth clipped or an experimental group where one or more low-birth weight piglets had their teeth left intact.

Overall, the lower-birth weight piglets benefited from intact-teeth in terms of lower mortality and higher weight gain. However, that benefit was completely offset by a comparable disadvantage to the larger littermates whose teeth were clipped. Therefore, the treatments had no effect on overall piglet mortality or weight gain. It did reduce within-litter 21-day body weight variation by 15%, leading

to more uniform weaning weights. However, selective clipping is not the only way to achieve more uniform weaning weights. Proper crossfostering within 24 hours of birth to even-up litter size and piglet bodyweight is effective. Also, identifying fall-outs quickly and providing them better nutrition will reduce weaning weight variation.

Possible Teeth Clipping Problems

There are some problems associated with teeth clipping that would be eliminated if clipping was stopped. If teeth clipping is not done properly, it may result in damage to the gums or roots of the teeth. When teeth are clipped too close to the gum, the gums may be cut and left open to infection. Or if the tool used is dull or broken, instead of neatly cutting off the sharp points of the teeth, it may splinter or split the tooth down through the roots. Infection that gets into the roots is extremely painful and prevents the piglet from eating.

Often the first sign of a tooth infection is a poor-doing piglet. It usually will get up to nurse with its littermates, but suckles intermittently. Usually there is swelling of the snout that is noticeable from a normal view and when the mouth is opened the damage is

obvious (Figure 2). The best way to prevent problems associated with broken teeth and mouth infections is to quit teeth clipping.

Joint infections in piglets sometimes are caused by the bacteria *Step suis*. The bacteria can enter the piglet's blood stream through damaged gums or broken teeth. If a piglet with a swollen joint also has infected teeth it is possible that damaged equipment or poor clipping technique is causing the problem.

Reason to Clip

Facial lesions resulting from intact-teeth favor development of greasy pig disease in some herds. Greasy pig disease is often a problem in newly established gilt herds. It's caused by the bacteria, *Staphylococcus hyicus*, which lives on the skin surface. Cuts made in the skin from intact-teeth allow the bacteria to enter the body. Some producers who quit teeth clipping have noticed more piglets with greasy pig disease and have resumed clipping.

Conclusion

Many pork producers have learned that it is not necessary to clip teeth. In addition, to saving labor, they report having fewer poor-doing piglets and joint infections. These producers would not have known teeth clipping could be abandoned had they not tried to stop. Producers who have not tried to stop clipping are advised to clip only half of the litters in a few farrowing groups and observe for possible problems. Some producers have tried to stop clipping, but because of greasy pig disease problems they clip routinely.

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