

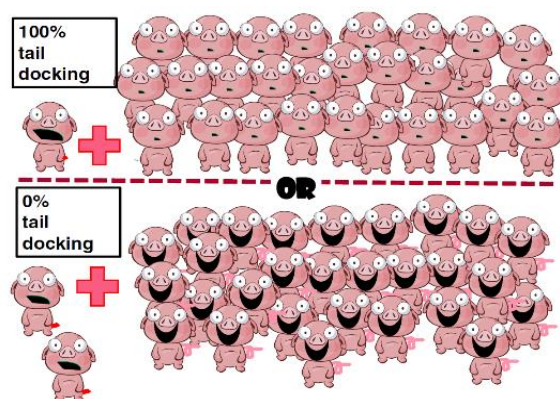
# Avoiding tail docking – practical guidance

## 1. Introduction

Pigs are natural omnivores and foraging for food is an essential part of their behavioural repertoire. Under the commercial rearing environment, although high concentrate feed is provided, pigs still have the need to root and forage in their environment. This is the most essential driver behind some abnormal behaviours commonly observed such as tail and ear biting.

To avoid tail biting, pigs' tails are routinely docked. This procedure has been proven to cause pain and distress to pigs regardless of which docking method is used, and it has negative impact on piglets' growth. Analgesia and anaesthesia are generally not applied during tail docking, and they are also found to be ineffective to prevent or later control painful reactions of piglets. There are long-term neurological damages caused by tail docking, and this can have a negative impact on pigs' life-time performance. It is also important to remember that tail docking does not eliminate tail biting.<sup>1</sup> Although tail biting appears difficult to predict and control due to the multiple risk factors behind it, there are actually many successful global cases of improved management that enable producers to raise pigs with intact tails, some reducing antibiotic use also.<sup>2</sup> Tail docking should only be used as a temporary and last resort when tail biting outbreaks happen persistently on a farm where all management requirements are met.

An intact and curly tail is the best indicator for good pig welfare and also better management practices and a higher standard of overall herd health. Not all pigs will suffer from being tail bitten and not all tail biting injuries will affect the pig's health, welfare and performance. Only by changing the mindset, stepping away from tail docking, the chance of having most pigs growing well without issues of tail biting becomes possible.



\* Valros and Heinonen (2015)

<sup>1</sup> Up to 3% of severe tail damages and more than 50% of observed tail lesions recorded in docked pig during slaughterhouse inspection (Harley et al. 2012, Valros 2018).

<sup>2</sup> See cases from Thailand, Sweden, Finland, Denmark and the Netherlands in World Animal Protection's [Sharing success – the global business case for higher welfare for pigs raised for meat.](#)

## 2. Understanding tail biting

There are 4 types of tail biting and it helps to deal with it when the different key causes are understood.

\*Table adapted from Valros, A., 2018. Tail biting. In *Advances in Pig Welfare* (pp. 137-166). Woodhead Publishing.

Type of tail biting	Description	Causes	Controls
<b>Two-stage (most common)</b>	Begins with mild biting and gradually develops into more severe biting leading to open and bleeding wounds	Lack of manipulable materials (enrichment)	Provide adequate enrichment and good housing <sup>3</sup>
<b>Sudden forceful</b>	One or more pigs suddenly start to target tails fiercely	Competition for resources (feed, water, enrichment, lying space)	Ensure good access to all resources
<b>Obsessive</b>	Usually one pig displays continuous tail biting behaviour towards all other pigs and causes severe injuries	Issue of individual pig such as genetics, long-term stress, malnutrition	Avoid stress (handling, noise, heat or cold stress, inability to perform foraging behaviour) and identify obsessive pigs sooner
<b>Epidemic</b>	Tail biting happens across several pens and can spread through the barn	Sudden changes in the environment such as feed or water disruption, ventilation and temperature	Improve management and monitor farm operation

## 3. How to avoid tail docking

There are many risk factors for tail biting, but many management practices can be improved to substantially reduce the need to dock tails.

<sup>3</sup> Adequate stocking density, areas of solid flooring, and comfortable climate; see below for further explanations.

**Adequate manipulable materials.** Fully or partially solid floor area makes it easier to provide some form of substrates on the floor directly which is ideal. Straw, hay, sawdust, peat, grass or any locally feasible materials can be used. Choose materials of suitable sizes to suit the slurry system and manure handling. If fully-slatted floor is used, elevated dispensers can be installed instead. A small daily ration can be effective. It is useful to also have some hanging items like chewable wooden blocks or hessian sacks in the pen. Be creative to use locally available materials, as long as they are safe, edible, destructible, and manipulable for the pigs. See our [enrichment factsheet](#)<sup>4</sup>.



**Sufficient feeder and drinker space.** Pigs are social animals and prefer to feed together. Long troughs are preferred and *ad-libitum* feeding can also reduce competition. There should be enough drinkers in the pen to access at all time. Feed, water and enrichment should all be kept fresh and clean to avoid mycotoxins, parasites or bacteria contamination.

**Appropriate stocking density.** There should be enough space for all pigs to lie down at the same time. Overstocking is a major risk for tail biting. Ideally a minimum of 1m<sup>2</sup> per pig is recommended for 50+kg pigs raised for meat. Be cautious about the actual space available for pigs to use (not including areas occupied by feeder or obstructed for any other reason).

**Comfortable climate.** Ventilation, temperature, air quality, ammonia level, and the presence of draught are all risks of increased tail biting. Routine monitoring of the housing condition is important. Computerised automated monitoring system is more and more common and can give warnings for systemic faults.

**Health and nutrition.** Pigs' health should be constantly monitored and recorded. Make sure the nutritional requirement for different ages of pigs is met. Sick and malnourished pigs are easier to become victims or instigators of tail biting. A good record keeping is important not just for tail biting but essential for health and performance monitoring in general.

**Stockperson training.** Automated monitoring still cannot replace a good stockperson. Training in picking up early signs of tail biting, noticing sick pigs and learning signs of heat stress (dirty pigs from lying in urines and faeces) are all crucial to prevent severe tail biting. See section 5 for a tail biting intervention toolkit.

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<sup>4</sup> World Animal Protection – Enrichment factsheet

## 4. Management checklist

Adequate enrichment (edible, destructible, manipulable) See our [enrichment factsheet](#)

Access to clean feed, water and lying space is sufficient

Appropriate stocking density (minimum of 1m<sup>2</sup> per pig is recommended for 50+kg pigs raised for meat)

Comfortable climate (temperature, ventilation, air quality)

Health

Stockperson training

Monitoring signs before tail biting outbreaks (using automatic monitoring systems or good observations from stockpersons)

If excessive tail biting still happens despite the above checklists, speak to the breeding company and change a breed or genetic line



\*Photo credit: Western Plains



\*Photo credit: European Commission, 2017

This link to videos of testimonials on how to raise pigs with undocked tails and the natural behaviours of pigs where tails can be a good indicator of pig welfare:

<https://www.grouphousenet.eu/pig-information-2>

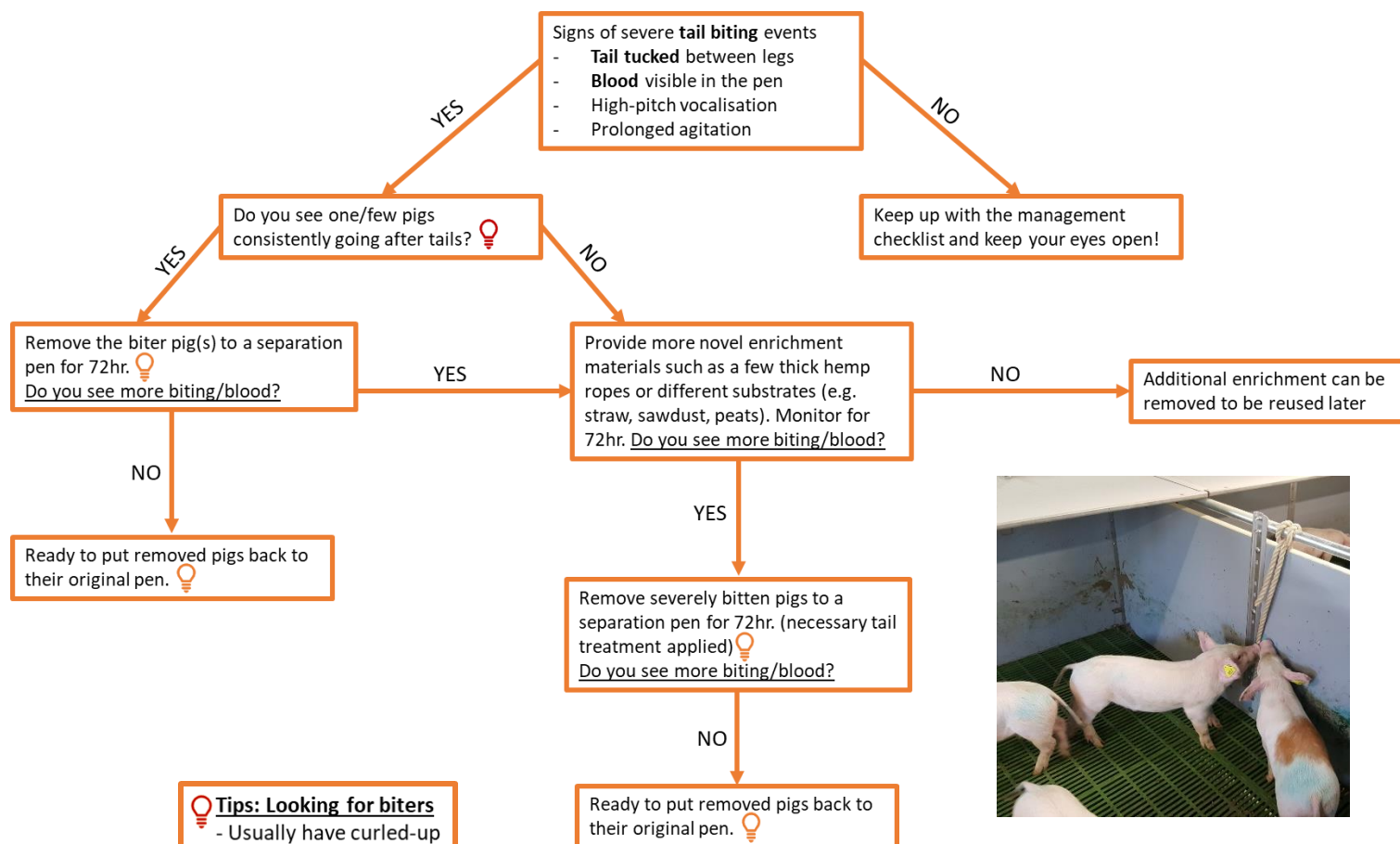
### Success – Betagro, Thailand

- Vertically integrated food company
- Top 20 global pig producers
- Up to 2.4 million pigs produced annually
- Phasing out tail docking in 2016
- Active communications with farmers
- Customised enrichment list developed
- Training as a key to success



## 5. Tail biting intervention tool

Under good management practices, the risk of tail biting is greatly reduced (see the previous section 4 for the management checklist). However, sometimes it can still happen unexpectedly. There are ways to predict and intervene successfully severe tail biting events.



**⚡ Tips: Looking for biters**

- Usually have curled-up tails when other pigs tucked their tails behind legs
- Watch for 10 mins to see if any pig keeps biting tails

**⚡ Tips: Removal / Reintroduction of pigs step-by-step**

- Remove pigs at least **in a pair**, so that they can be reintroduced together
- Write down the **pen number/date** from which they are removed and date of removal
- **Do not regroup** animals from different pens into one separation pen
- Reintroduce pigs within **7 days** of removing them
- Only reintroduce pigs to the **same** pen as where they came from
- Spray the pigs with a scent masking spray, such as diluted Dettol, when reintroducing them
- Provide extra enrichment material, such as ropes, when reintroducing the pigs (these items can later be removed and reused)

### Contact us

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