Avoiding teeth reduction – practical guidance.

1. Introduction

Piglets are born with a pair of needle-sharp teeth at each of the front four corners of their jaws. In a few circumstances, these teeth can damage the sow's teats during suckling, making them sore and making her reluctant to nurse. Piglets can sometimes inflict facial wounds on their litter mates in competition to access a teat.

Teeth clipping/grinding[1] (reduction) should never be the first management tool against these problems, as these practices may hide underlying and wider welfare and productivity problems, and are associated with excessive antibiotic use. Teeth reduction directly involves stress, pain and disruption to piglets. For these reasons, routine preventive teeth reduction is becoming less common on pig farms. Avoiding teeth reduction also saves time and labour costs.[2]

To avoid face and udder wounds, selective breeding should aim for optimum not maximum litter size. Although not ideal, large litters can be manged by fostering and supplementary milk products, and sows should be kept comfortable and in good health to ensure high milk production.

When teeth reduction is used as a last resort as other management options have not been effective, how often the practice is used should be regularly reviewed to avoid becoming a standard practice. A target can be set: for example, in Brazil, most farms avoid teeth reduction by following the main advice below. They note that 5% of piglet facial lesions caused by fighting may be acceptable.

Success – ALIAR S. A., Columbia

- Largest pig producer in Columbia
- Teeth clipping phased out 10 years ago
- More efficient production
- Key: comfort of sows and piglets guaranteed
- Consultation and training of employees

[1] Research shows that both methods cause substantial pain to the piglets (teeth grinding also more than previously thought), disrupt suckling, growth and risk infection and other complications.
[2] See cases from Colombia, Brazil and Thailand in World Animal Protection's Sharing success – the global business case for higher welfare for pigs raised for meat.

2. How to avoid teeth reduction

Risk factors for the presence of facial/udder wounds include large or excess litter sizes, low colostrum/milk production, parity 1 sows, and mispractice of cross fostering. Good sow and piglet management can replace teeth reduction.

***Select adequate litter size*.** It is important to select breeding that matches litter sizes to the number of sows' functional teats. This directly helps minimise the risks of sow and piglet injury and avoids low birthweight piglets. This can also significantly reduce pre-weaning mortality, sow uterine prolapse and mortality. Producers should aim for optimum litter size weaned rather than maximum litter size. Selecting for good mother ability of sows and ultimately moving towards free farrowing systems (which correlate with increased milk production) can also be part of the solution.

***Improve colostrum/milk production & sow care*.** There are many reasons why a sow might be producing less milk:

Parity 1 sows may produce less milk, but it's important to have a proper litter size on these sows (e.g. 10-12 piglets). This will stimulate her udder tissue, so she will be productive for future litters.

Post-partum dysgalactia syndrome (PPDS) may lead to low milk production. PPDS is linked to reduced feed and water intake, which decreases milk production. PPDS may be a sign of infection requiring veterinary treatment. Inflammation of the udder is painful, making the sow reluctant to nurse. It may also be influenced by pain or exhaustion from the farrowing process.

Sow nutrition and feeding is crucial in maintaining good milk production. Adjusting sow diet for the various stages of gestation and lactation can be beneficial and feeding lactating sows up to 5 times daily as well as liquid feeding. In tropical climates where liquid feeding is not feasible, feeding mostly at night can be practiced (for example in Vietnam). Diets with lower crude protein levels and increased levels of antioxidants, supports better consumption and reduced digestive heat. Also, it is important to have a proper transition diet from gestation to lactation (e.g. with increased levels of fibre) to stimulate increased feed intake of sows and hence, increase milk production. Water flow rate is vital for lactating sows, a slow flow rate may cause inadequate water intake by the sow.

Proper climate improves sows' appetite. In hot and humid conditions, considering supplying cooled drinking water and ensuring ventilation is working effectively (or possibly sow cooling pads). Where necessary, use supplementary milk products.

***Care with large litters*.** If a sow does have a litter of 13 or more, or more piglets than she has functional teats for, consider split suckling (allow half the litter to suckle for around 1 hour, then swap to allow the other half udder access) within 8-10 hours of farrowing. This ensures that all piglets can gain enough colostrum (first udder secretions containing antibodies for piglets to fight disease and stay healthy). Colostrum replacement products can be used to assist weak piglets. Sows with abundant colostrum can be milked into a clean cup, to feed weak piglets using a clean syringe. Between 8 to 24 hours after birth, fostering (removing a piglet(s) from their natural mother onto another sow with spare teats) can be used to even up litters.

3. Management checklist

☑ Ensure staff training includes good observational and monitoring of sows

When sows enter their farrowing pen, check:

☑ Write down the number of functional teats

☑ Water flow rate is 1 or better 2 L per minute (cooled in hot climates)

Around farrowing, check:

☑ The sow is healthy, eating, drinking, comfortable and producing enough milk for her litter. Thermal comfort is particularly important as is *ad libitum* water. Sow has well developed udder (smooth and shiny) with good milk production.

☑ Nesting materials are present to help stimulate milk production. Ideally avoid farrowing crates which also restrict comfort and milk production.

☑ Small piglets feel warm and can access the udder for colostrum (bedding can help dry piglets and cut heat loss).

☑ The number of piglets is not greater than functional teats

☑ Excessive noise or fighting when suckling means hungry litters: look for teat/udder/face wounds

☑ Check the sows' health, feeding, lying behaviour and manure consistency

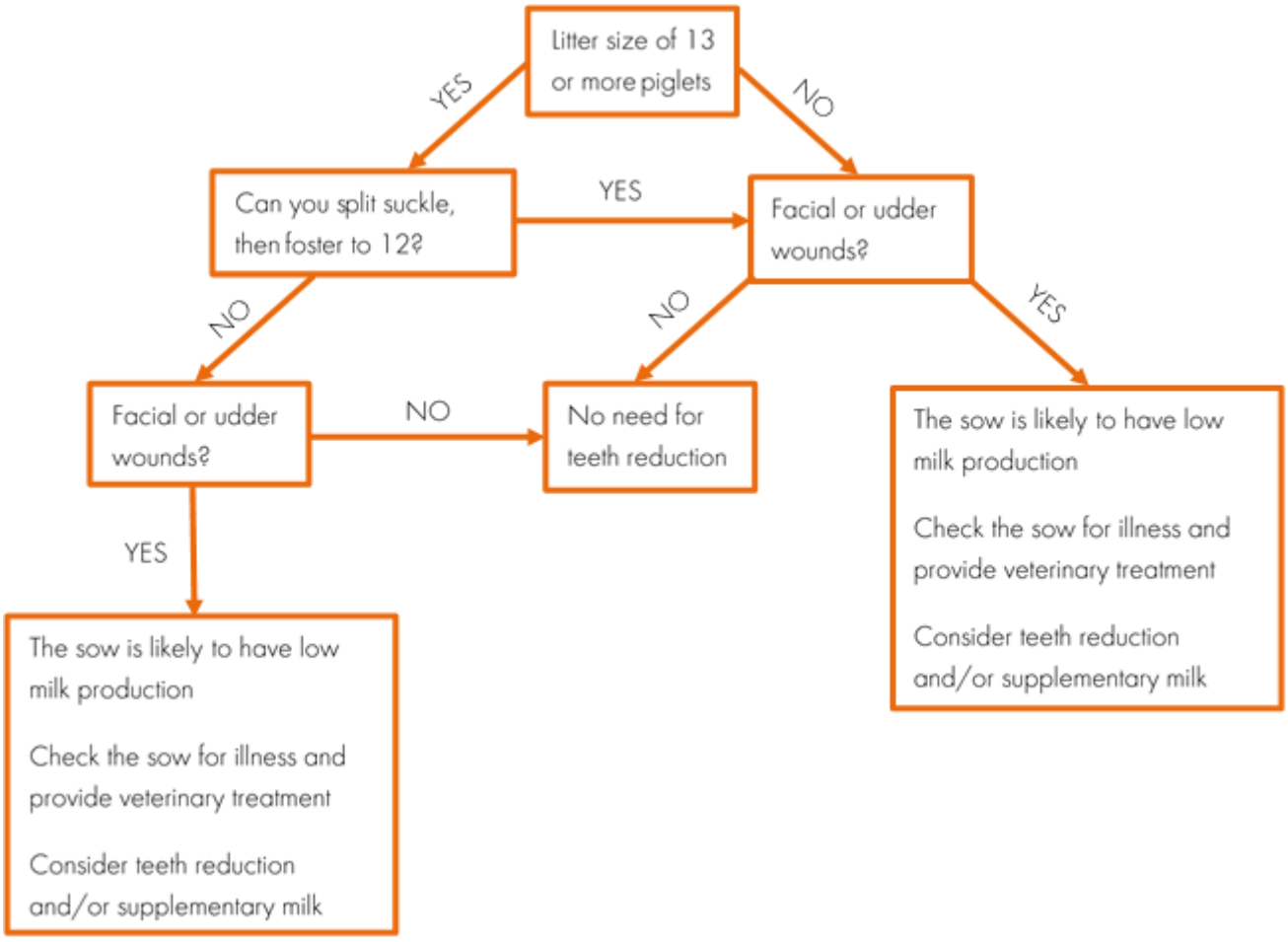
☑ If large litter size: Up until 10 hours after farrowing, split suckle large litters. 10-24 hours after farrowing, foster piglets from large litters to sows with smaller litters

☑ Before fostering, watch for piglets using the same teat and mark them

☑ Foster larger, stronger piglets, one of two piglets suckling the same teat, and females

4. Decision tree

Teeth reduction should not be necessary, after avoiding hyperprolific sows and implementing good training. It should only be considered after improved management of sow and piglets, including sow comfort and health optimised, and supplementary milk where sow milk production is low. (see 3. checklist)



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