

Tail biting can affect a single pig or an entire pen of pigs, and it can either be very sporadic in nature or a chronic problem. Tail biting is one of the top behavioral problems in grow-finish pigs that can lead to economic losses due to reductions in gain, secondary infections, death, or carcass condemnations. Numerous factors such as environment, animal husbandry, and nutrition can play a role in triggering this negative behavior.

Pigs are naturally very curious animals that utilize their mouths as a means to explore and learn more about their environment. Anyone who has walked through a pen of pigs knows that some individual pigs or genetic lines of pigs are more curious and willing to come up and bite the top of your boot. This natural curiosity may be a trigger for tail biting. Studies have shown that pigs are attracted the taste and sight of blood, and if a pig draws blood from accidentally biting a pen mate's tail it could elicit the negative behavior in that individual pig or even spread to the entire group of pigs. However, natural behavior is only a piece of the puzzle and as previously stated, numerous other factors can increase the prevalence of tail biting such as:

- Tail docking
- Nutrition (out of feed events, salt deficiency, etc.)
- Increased stocking density and overcrowding
- Temperature extremes
- Poor ventilation (poor air quality, drafts, humidity)
- Light (too dim/too bright, less than 6 hours of darkness per day)
- Health challenges



Tail docking

Properly docking tails is one of the best methods to reduce the incidence of tail biting. Docked tails should be uniform in length as it has been reported that herds with variable tail lengths had a greater incidence of tail biting. Ideally, tails should have 2/3 of the tail docked at processing leaving 1/3 of the tail intact. However, it is more important to consistently dock tails to the same length rather than get exactly 2/3 docked.

Nutrition

Inadequate access to quality feed and water can both act as a trigger for tail biting. Some common feed quality issues associated with tail biting can include mycotoxins, low salt levels, or improperly balanced diets.

Stocking Density

As stocking density increases, so does competition at the feeder and waterer, which can result in increased ear and tail biting. In addition to stocking density, mixing pigs or pens with greater size variation may also have an increased risk of tail biting.



Environment

A number of environmental factors within a barn can influence the incidence of tail biting such as: excessive heat or cold, improper ventilation, lighting, dust, or noxious gases. In current production systems, heat stress during the warm summer months is of greater concern than cold stress during the winter months. When pigs reach their upper critical temperature they begin to experience heat stress, which can trigger negative behaviors such as tail biting. It has been observed, in some cases, that misting pigs during hot weather has reduced tail biting. However, reports from the field have noted that daily temperature variations have led to increased tail biting compared to a consistent temperature outside of the pig's thermoneutral zone.

Drafts and increased humidity caused by improper ventilation can increase pig stress and tail-biting. Barn lighting, too brightly or dimly lit or not enough hours of darkness, may also impact the occurrence of tail biting. It is recommended that fluorescent lights emit 0.2 watts/ft², whereas incandescent lights should emit around 0.8 watts/ft², with at least 6 hours of darkness. Maintaining an optimal living environment through proper ventilation, lighting and temperature control will have a positive impact on pig welfare and the incidence of tail biting.

There is no silver bullet when it comes to treating tail biting, because a specific remedy may work for one producer and not another. The following is a list of treatments that have shown some success in the field:

- Adding 5-10 lbs/ton of Magnesium Oxide to the diet
- Adding an additional 2-4 lbs/ton of salt to the diet
- Adding 2-5 lbs/ton of Potassium Chloride to the diet
- Adding 1.5 lbs/ton of Zinc Oxide to the diet
- Adding 100 lbs/ton of soyhulls to the diet
- Adding 200 lbs/ton DDGS to the diet
- Providing a small amount of clean hay, straw, or soil on the pen floor

During a tail biting outbreak it is important to try and identify the biters and treat/remove the bitten pigs, to prevent the behavior from spreading to other pigs. The options listed above are simply Band-Aids to the actual underlying issue that is causing the tail biting. Tail biting is best prevented through minimizing stress and meeting the pig's biological needs.

Tail Biting FAQ

Does Hubbard offer any products that could provide support during a tail biting outbreak?

Yes, both Opti-Remedy and Assist can be used as a tool in reducing the occurrence of tail biting. Opti-Remedy is a blend of essential oils that enhances gut health. Assist is a combination of a yeast culture product and copper chloride and also helps to reduce harmful bacteria and improve intestinal health and growth performance of the pig. When pigs have a healthy gut they are better equipped to handle environmental stressors and reduce the incidence of disease, both of which are listed as tail biting triggers.

Are “toys” beneficial in reducing tail biting? If so, what toys are the best to use?

Numerous toys such as bowling balls, tires, auger flighting on gates, chains, garden hoses, swinging waterers, just to name a few, have been used in hog barns as boredom busters over the years. Regardless, of the toy selected it must be able to withstand constant use and remain accessible to all pigs in the pen. Similar to other remedies, the use of toys in reducing tail biting has been inconsistent.