

# ASK THE VET...

## COULD 'LOOSE' PIGS AND AN EXTENDED DRAWING PERIOD BE ILEITIS?

**Duncan Berkshire** (MA VetMB MSc CertPM MRCVS), from the North Yorkshire-based XL Vets Bishopton Veterinary Group, tackles a timely question on pig gut health

### QUESTION:

My grower and finisher pigs have been showing 'looseness' recently. My drawing period of batches at slaughter (first pigs off farm to last pigs) has also extended to six weeks from my previous average of four weeks. Are there any obvious reasons for this and what can I do to help return to normal production?

### ANSWER:

It's interesting to note that there has been a significant increase in loose faeces within growing and finishing herds during the past few weeks, with various different reasons for this to occur. This time of year coincides with the post-harvest incorporation of new grains into rations which, depending on how this is managed, can cause some disruption to the normal microflora (mainly bacteria) within the healthy pig gut. This can complicate the picture somewhat, making definitive diagnosis of what is happening on farm more difficult.

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Disruption to the normal microflora in the gut can lead, on its own, to increased looseness being seen within the muck of individual pigs. Often this is short



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groups, make sure you discuss this with your vet so that appropriate tests can be carried out to achieve the right diagnosis.

Getting the correct diagnosis can sometimes be tricky when there are several elements involved, along with the fact that clinically healthy pigs can also harbour the bacteria with no ill effects. If ileitis is a main infection within your pigs, your vet will be able to give advice on appropriate treatments to gain the best effect on your farm.

*Lawsonia* bacteria are usually sensitive to several different antimicrobials, appropriately timed windows of which can be given either in feed or via the water supply to control the bacteria as they invade the gut. There is also a live oral vaccine licensed in the UK, which gives protection throughout the growing and finishing period and can assist control programmes on some farms.

Cleaning and disinfection between groups of pigs is very important to reduce infection pressure to the next batch, while the entry of the disease to your farm is important to stop. The bacteria travel with pigs, so all incoming stock to a breeding unit should be quarantined and excellent biosecurity needs to be practised by staff, visitors and machinery.

Where ileitis is causing clinical problems on farm, it can usually be controlled well enough to allow production to return to normal. Longer-term control then revolves around reducing the infection pressure and stabilising the gut health of your animals on farm.

lived, as the usual gut bacteria adapt to the balance of the revised diet, with normal consistency of the muck then returning. Occasionally inflammation of the gut lining can also result, with opportunistic infections then jumping on board and causing more severe disease.

Several bacteria can inhabit the healthy pig gut without giving rise to clinical signs of disease, including those responsible for ileitis (inflammation of the small intestine) and colitis (inflammation of the large intestine). It sounds like your variability in pig growth (extended draw periods) and looseness is more likely linked to a clinical ileitis.

### CLINICAL SIGNS

Ileitis is caused by a bacterium called *Lawsonia intracellularis*, which is present on a high percentage of farms across Europe. Clinical signs can be seen between eight and 10 days post-infection, although occasionally this can occur earlier. The normal pig gut breaks down the food in the stomach and small intestine, before all the good parts and water are absorbed within the small and large intestines.

The ileitis bacteria infect the cells that line the end of the small intestine and the first part of the large intestine, causing them to swell to a huge size. This thickening

of the intestinal lining means that the surface area is reduced and so the absorption of all the nutrients is hindered. Variable amounts of looseness result within groups of pigs, from recently post-weaned pigs through to finishers, with muck generally being anything from a normal dark brown colour through to a lighter tan, almost feed-like colour.

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This form of the disease gives hugely variable growth rates and feed efficiencies, even in pigs that do not show loose muck, and this can make draw periods for slaughter later and longer in length.

In the acute form of the disease, some of the cells lining the intestine can swell so much that they burst and cause bleeding into the gut. Pigs affected this way often present as pale animals with a red/black loose and sticky muck – mortality is also increased with



this particular presentation.

So what can you do to help your pigs? If you feel that some of the signs have started as the new grains have come through, then discuss how you can blend different grains and 'between rations' better, to assist with balancing the gut microflora within your pigs, with your feed mill/nutritionist. The more effective blending of rations over feed type changes can have beneficial effects on the majority of farms.

If there is the likelihood of some involvement of ileitis within the

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Send your animal health questions to: [sophie.thrup@xlvets.co.uk](mailto:sophie.thrup@xlvets.co.uk)