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Care and Management of Sows during Farrowing and Essential Care of Newborn Piglets

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The period around farrowing is the most critical phase in pig production. Although genetic potential and nutrition influence performance, piglet survival is largely determined during birth and the first 72 hours of life. Most pre-weaning losses occur due to stillbirths, hypothermia, starvation, infections, and crushing by the sow [1]. With proper planning, hygiene, and supervision, a large proportion of these losses can be prevented. This article outlines practical steps for pre-farrowing preparation, management during farrowing, and essential neonatal care.

Pre-Farrowing Preparation (7–10 Days Before Farrowing)

The sow's gestation period averages 114 days, commonly described as *3 months, 3 weeks, and 3 days*. Preparation should begin at least one week before the expected date.

Facility Preparation

Adopting an **all-in/all-out system** is essential to reduce disease pressure.

- Completely empty the farrowing room and wash thoroughly using detergent and a high-pressure washer.
- Apply a broad-spectrum disinfectant and allow the room to dry for **24–48 hours**, as drying helps break disease cycles [1].

Environmental Management

- **Sow comfort temperature:** 18–20°C Heat stress reduces feed intake, milk production, and increases restlessness, raising the risk of piglet crushing.
- **Piglet creep temperature:** 32–35°C Newborn piglets have poor thermoregulation and require a warm, protected creep area using heat lamps or mats.

Sow Management

- Move sows into farrowing crates **about 5 days before farrowing** to allow acclimatization.
- Gradually shift to a **high-energy lactation diet**. Constipation should be avoided, as it can prolong labour; adding fiber sources such as wheat bran is beneficial.
- Ensure vaccinations against diseases like *E. coli* and *Clostridium* are up to date to enhance antibody transfer through colostrum [2].

Management During Farrowing

Careful supervision during farrowing can reduce stillbirths and early piglet mortality by up to **50 per cent** [3].

Signs and Duration of Labor

- Nest-building behaviour, restlessness, and milk let-down indicate impending farrowing.
- Normal farrowing lasts **3–5 hours**, with piglets born at intervals of **15–20 minutes**.

Assistance and Piglet Care at Birth

- If more than **45 minutes** pass between piglets and the sow is straining, gentle manual assistance may be required using a clean, lubricated, gloved hand.
- Non-breathing piglets should have mucus removed from the nose and mouth, followed by gentle chest rubbing to stimulate breathing.
- The umbilical cord should be dipped in **iodine or chlorhexidine** to prevent infection.

The "Golden Hour": Colostrum Intake

Colostrum is the **only source of immunity** for newborn piglets. Adequate intake during the first few hours is critical for survival [2].

- Piglets should consume **150–200 g of colostrum per kg body weight** within the first **6–12 hours**.
- In large litters, **split-suckling** can be practiced by temporarily removing stronger piglets, allowing weaker ones better access to teats.

Neonatal Care During the First 72 Hours

The first three days focus on **Safety, Starvation prevention, and Sickness prevention**.

Routine Piglet Processing

- **Iron injection:** 150–200 mg iron dextran (IM) to prevent anaemia.
- **Tail docking and teeth clipping:** Performed where necessary to prevent injuries and future management problems.
- **Identification:** Ear notching or tagging for proper record keeping.

Cross-Fostering

- Best done **4–24 hours after birth**, once colostrum intake is ensured.
- The objective is to match piglet numbers with available functional teats.
- Only stronger piglets should be moved; weak piglets should not be shifted [3].

Prevention of Crushing

Crushing by the sow is the leading cause of pre-weaning mortality.

- Use farrowing crates with **swing or fingered bars** to slow the sow while lying down.
- Encourage piglets to rest in the creep area by placing them under the heat source after nursing.

Early Nutrition

- Introduce **highly palatable creep feed (≈20% protein)** at **7–10 days of age** to prepare piglets for weaning.
- Ensure access to clean drinking water through a nipple drinker, especially in warm conditions.

Conclusion

Effective farrowing management begins well before birth and continues through the first 72 hours of life. Clean facilities, proper thermal management, timely supervision during farrowing, and focused neonatal care can dramatically reduce piglet losses. Attention to this short but critical period ensures healthier piglets, improved growth, and greater profitability in pig production.

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