

Dig the pig – top tips on swine, swill and sausages

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Clare has been a pet pig keeper for many years and loves to share her experience and knowledge of this topic. She graduated from the Royal Veterinary College in 1984.

Born in the Chinese Zodiac Year of the Pig, Clare is attracted by their fascinating behaviour and adorable personalities, which make them such delightful pets.

Clare has practised in the UK and France and currently works as a small animal locum and small animal nutrition technical adviser. She lives in the Forest of Dean, one of only three established breeding sites for wild boar in Britain, and is an active member of the Commoner's Association

ABSTRACT: Pigs are part of the fabric of our upbringing. Rare breeds are popular with smallholders, while micro/mini-pigs are kept as novel indoor pets.

This article provides advice on pet pig care. Owners may love their pet pig just as they would a dog; but healthcare requirements are different.

Did you that know pigs cannot perspire? They lose heat by panting, are prone to heatstroke and sunburn in summer and catching cold easily in winter. Pigs develop salt poisoning if deprived of water, too.

Regulations prohibit feeding them waste food and unbalanced diets may cause osteomalacia. Vaccination helps prevent diseases such as Erysipelas (like piggy measles and a potential zoonosis).

Pigs are fascinating, intelligent, social and clean animals with important behavioural, physical and welfare needs. Owners must comply with the legislation governing pig keeping. Time, commitment, finance, facilities and access to veterinary care are important. Above all, owners must remember pigs require space – size really does matter!

Children love learning about 'the little piggy that ate roast beef', 'the Three Little Pigs', *Babe* and *Peppa Pig*. From our infancy, pigs are part of the fabric of our upbringing. Their squeals and snorts, ungainly antics, lack of elegance and macabre beauty capture our imagination.

Newly born piglets are cute and appealing but they grow quickly – commercial breeds, such as the Landrace and Large White, reaching 200kg within months. The heaviest recorded pig weighed 1158kg!

Figure 1. People are becoming progressively more concerned about the source of the meat they eat and the pigs' welfare needs



Commercially kept pigs are reared intensively for the sole purpose of meat production. Indeed, half the meat consumed globally is pork. Each year in the UK, 10 million pigs are reared commercially for meat (**Figure 1**).

Pigs have a discriminating sense of smell, are still used in France to find truffles and they are being used by some police forces to detect smuggled drugs. Pigs are also used for clearing waste ground (**Figure 2**). In many learning tests, pigs out-perform dogs!

Figure 2. Pigs are also used for forest management and clearing of waste ground



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Overview of pet pigs

The pig is a farm pet popular with smallholders, and micro- and mini-pigs (bred from pot belly pigs) are quite popular as novel indoor pets. Although these latter pigs are often described as cute and easy to look after, anyone considering purchasing one must first consider carefully whether they will be able to provide for its needs.

Several different breeds of pig are kept as pets, including the Vietnamese Pot-Bellied and Kune Kune pigs (Figures 3a & 3b, 4, 5).

Figures 3a & 3b. Vietnamese Pot-Bellied Pigs grow to about one third of the size of a commercial pig and weigh about 50kg but can exceed 150kg; these photos are of the same piglet at 6 and 18 months old



Figure 4. Vietnamese Pot-Bellied Pigs are indigenous to the forests of SE Asia and they are akin to the Chinese House Pig



Figures 5: Kune Kune pigs were domesticated by New Zealand Maoris. They have throat tassels (piri piri) and turned-up snouts and graze rather than root; they are not aggressive but strong and are easier to handle and train – even house train!

These needs include: a proper diet (including fresh water), somewhere suitable to live, satisfaction of any need to be housed with or apart from other animals, provision to express normal behaviour and protection from – and treatment of – illness and injury.

Housing

Micro- and mini-pigs need to be kept in groups with other friendly, similar-sized pigs – not only because they are social herd animals but also because they can become frustrated, lonely or aggressive if housed alone. They use specific areas for dunging, exploration and sleeping and need sufficient space to make these separate areas.

Pigs love to root and, deprived of this opportunity, they may become destructive (in the case of house pigs this could include damage to household furniture, fittings and electric cables).



Figure 6. Tamworth pigs are a native British breed of scarcity value; they are generally healthy, easily bred and provide excellent meat



Figure 7. Saddleback pigs have flop ears, which impair their range of vision

Outdoor pigs spend a large part of their waking day exploring their environment, rooting and foraging (Figure 8), causing all vegetation to disappear quickly. 'Poaching' (muddy areas of ground) can develop near doorways and gates in clay areas during wet weather.

Without a stimulating environment, micro- and mini-pigs are highly likely to develop negative or stereotypic behaviour. Straw, hard plastic balls and tyres can be placed in the pig pen for the pigs to play with, encourage exercise and prevent boredom. Pigs must also be exercised regularly to avoid obesity, constipation and to prevent their feet from becoming overgrown.



Figure 8. Pigs can be encouraged to explore and forage for food by throwing a small quantity of their food ration into their paddock

There is also 'conservation breeding' of the traditional and rare British breeds, such as the Gloucester Old Spot, Tamworth, Berkshire, Saddleback, Hampshire and Welsh (Figures 6 & 7). Their average life span is five to 10 years, although some can live up to 25 years.

Welfare and husbandry

Under the Animal Welfare Act, anyone who is responsible for a pet has a legal duty to meet its five basic welfare needs so that it remains healthy and happy.

Pigs are very strong, so the area in which they are housed must have pig-proof fencing surrounding it to prevent them from escaping. Being highly inquisitive makes them liable to poisoning.

Pigs produce 6kg of waste daily, so disposal must be planned in order to avoid smell or hygiene problems and upsetting neighbours.

It is important to ensure that pigs are kept in well-ventilated premises but not exposed to draughts, sudden temperature changes or prolonged exposure to sunshine (Figures 9a & 9b). Pigs cannot perspire, so they lose heat by panting. They are very poor thermo-regulators, meaning they have great difficulty keeping cool in summer and warm in winter (Figures 10a & 10b).

Figures 9a & 9b. In cooler weather, and at night, pigs must always have access to warm, dry, draught-free, straw-bedded accommodation, as they are very susceptible to the cold



Water

A supply of clean, fresh drinking water must be available to the pigs at all times. Adult pigs may drink up to 20 litres of water a day, and even mini-pigs may drink around five litres. Salt poisoning occurs rapidly as a consequence of water deprivation – for example, if water pipes become frozen or if the water container is knocked over.

Food

There are rules about what a pig can – or cannot – be fed, too. In order to prevent



Figures 10a & 10b. It is very important to ensure that in warm weather, pigs are provided with a wallow (with clean water) and adequate cover to shelter from the sun (pigs are prone to sunburn and sunstroke)

the spread of disease, it is illegal to feed any waste food to pigs.

A commercially prepared pig ration should be fed in divided meals, with the total amount not exceeding two per cent of the pig's body weight (except during lactation, when sows require additional food to meet their energy requirements). Fibre should be added to improve 'gut fill' and prevent constipation.

Keeping the pig's weight in check, by providing the correct diet and adequate opportunity for exercise, helps to reduce the problems exacerbated or caused by obesity. These include arthritis (which can be a problem especially in older animals) and 'fat blindness' which occurs when fat-filled peri-orbital skin folds occlude the line of vision. Use a good-quality balanced diet (including a biotin supplement to improve hoof quality if necessary).

Veterinary care

If a pig requires treatment, the veterinary surgeon is usually called out to see it. Some veterinary surgeons are reluctant to treat pet pigs, as they may be unfamiliar with the species. Their sheer size (especially if they are uncooperative) along with the pitch and volume of their squeal can be quite unnerving.

Some have a very good temperament; others should be handled with care! Pig boards, snares, gags and head torches can be indispensable.

Many obstacles can be overcome by contacting specialist pig veterinary surgeons with Diplomas or Certificates in pig medicine who freely offer advice to colleagues faced with pig problems.

Feet

Feet should be checked regularly to ensure they are not becoming overgrown, and professional foot trimming carried out if necessary. Providing access to hard surfaces can help to maintain foot health.

Disease

Vermin control is an essential part of good stock management; and pigs are vectors for some zoonoses (Figures 11 & 12).

The zoonoses of concern include swine erysipelas and salmonellosis. It is wise to consider vaccinal control of diseases such as erysipelas, which causes pyrexia, diamond skin lesions, infertility, arthritis and endocarditis.

Figure 11. Iron injections may be required to control anaemia in pigs that have no access to soil, which is their natural source of the mineral



Figure 12. Pig health care should include routine monitoring, with treatment as required for both endo- and ectoparasites. This Kune Kune pig has sarcoptic mange (*Sarcoptes scabiei*) which is not uncommon



When prescribing medicines, veterinary surgeons must remember that pigs are food-production animals subject to meat withdrawal legislation.

Reproduction

Many pet pigs are neutered to control reproduction (since pigs are prolific breeders) and to prevent some reproductive disorders. Micro-pigs are the product of selective breeding for smallness (miniaturisation) which often involves in-breeding and its associated problems including decreased fertility and increased risk of deformities, such as inverted eyelids.

Legislation

Movement

Pet pigs have a degree of exemption from the movement regulations with regard to exercising the animal (**Figure 13**). Owners wishing to walk their animals off their premises may do so by applying for an exemption certificate issued at the discretion of the local Animal Health Office Veterinary Officer.

Swill feeding

No waste food may be fed to a pig at any time.



Figure 13. The holding must be registered and every pig must be identified via ear tag or slap mark. An electronic pig movement licence (eAML2) must be sought every time a pig is moved from its home (e.g. to a show or to the veterinary surgery), followed by a 20-day 'standstill' during which time the pig cannot be moved again

Transport


It is illegal to transport pet pigs in any vehicle that has not been constructed properly to carry them – this includes a car. Vehicles must comply with DEFRA regulations and should be constructed and maintained to avoid injury and suffering and to ensure the safety of the animals.

Any vehicle used to transport pigs must be thoroughly washed and disinfected after use with a disinfectant approved to prevent diseases including swine vesicular disease and foot-and-mouth disease.

Summary

The expressions 'happy as a pig in muck', 'a fat pig is a happy pig' and 'pig sick', say more about us than about the nature of pigs. Pigs are fascinating, intelligent, sociable and clean, with important behavioural, physical and welfare requirements.

All owners must comply with the legislation governing pig keeping, which exists in order to prevent the spread of disease. Time, commitment, facilities and access to veterinary care are vital. Pig feed is very expensive and even pet mini- or micro-pigs require space (size really does matter).

Last but not least, remember that you will definitely get muddy! 

Suggested reading

- RSPCA (2013) Welfare of Pigs Information Sheet.
- AHVLA (2012) Advice for owners of pet pigs and micro pigs.
- BSAVA (2008) Farm Pets, BSAVA Manual.
- DEFRA (Aug 2013) Code of Recommendations for Welfare of Livestock (Pigs)
- CARR, J. (2013) Pet pigs and the swine unit. In: *Managing Pig Health*, 2nd Edn (Eds Muirhead, Alexander and Carr) (5m Publishing)

NEWS REVIEW by Jean Turner

Call for Scotland to ban wild animals in circuses

The British Veterinary Association (BVA) is calling on the Scottish Government to ban the use of wild animals in travelling circuses. A consultation launched by the Scottish Government is asking whether the practice should be banned in Scotland.

A ban is expected in England by the end of 2015, following a campaign backed by the BVA, Born Free Foundation, Captive Animals' Protection Society and RSPCA. The BVA wrote to ministers in all three devolved nations, including Cabinet Secretary Richard Lochhead, early last year to call for proposed legislation in England to be extended to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

There are currently four travelling circuses using wild animals in England. A travelling circus is no place for wild animals and their welfare is of grave concern. Although there are none based in Scotland at this time the BVA and other campaigners would like to see UK-wide legislation to prevent such performances moving to the devolved countries in the future.

The consultation is open until 16 April 2014 at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2014/01/5291/downloads>

Rabbit awareness week

Following its success last year, Rabbit Awareness Week (RAW) is set to return between 10 - 18 May to kick-start a campaign that aims to prompt 'One Small Hop' of change from owners.

RAW, an annual campaign that aims to highlight the health and welfare of Britain's pet rabbits, is backed by Burgess Excel, the RSPCA, PDSA, Blue Cross, MSD Animal Health, Bayer Animal Health, Practice Plan for Vets, RWF (Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund) and Wood Green, The Animals Charity.

The organisers are urging vets, retailers and rescue centres more than ever before to offer a helping hand to pet owners to highlight the importance of preventive healthcare and welfare advice for rabbits.

It couldn't be easier to sign up and be part of RAW 2014. If you are hosting a rabbit healthcare clinic or an event, visit www.rabbitawarenessweek.co.uk to order your free support kit and register your event.

