

# Caring for New Feeder Pigs

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People purchase feeder pigs to raise for home use, market, or as a 4-H or FFA project for summer fairs. By following a few key recommendations, you can keep your pigs healthy and gaining weight. This publication briefly discusses housing, feeding, and health.

## Housing

The first thing to do is to prepare the pen prior to the arrival of the pigs. A clean, draft-free area is important to prevent the animals from becoming stressed after arrival. Shelter from rain and snow is important if the pen is located outside. If the pen has housed hogs previously, clean and disinfect it with a product labeled for use in barns that will kill both viruses and bacteria.

The pen(s) should provide adequate space for all of the pigs to be purchased. In general, pigs that weigh less than 40 pounds should have between 3 and 4 square feet per head, while pigs weighing more than 150 pounds need at least 8 to 10 square feet each.

Once the pigs arrive, supplemental heat, bedding, or hovers may be necessary to keep them warm. The ideal temperature range for a 50-pound pig is 70 to 82°F. The optimum range for a pig over 215 pounds is 50 to 75°F. Feeder pigs can become stressed and ill if they get too cold during the chilly nights that are common in Oregon in April and May.

Heat lamps often are used to keep pigs warm, but extreme caution must be used to prevent a fire. Bedding and floor pads work well. Hovers can be used to conserve heat in a smaller area. A hover is a boxlike structure that captures heat and reduces drafts. This simple box can be placed in a farrowing crate or nursery

pen. One side of the hover is open so that young pigs can get inside.

## Feeding

Clean water is necessary, as is a palatable, complete feed. Swine are raised on a variety of feeds, ranging from commercial swine rations to by-products such as bakery waste. Average daily gains vary according to the quality of the feed.

Because of their simple, monogastric stomach, pigs require more concentrates (grain) and less roughage or fiber (hay) than cattle or sheep. This is especially true for young pigs. Most quality commercial starter and grower rations for swine contain no more than 5 percent crude fiber.

Protein and energy are important nutrients. Ten- to 20-pound pigs require a crude protein level of at least 20 percent; 25- to 45-pound pigs need 18 percent protein; and 45- to 150-pound animals need at least 16 percent protein. Pigs weighing more than 150 pounds need at least 14 percent crude protein.

Pigs also require higher quality protein than cattle or sheep. Amino acids, called the “building blocks of protein,” are important components of swine feeds. Commercial swine feeds should contain amino acids or highly digestible protein sources rich in amino acids.

Energy from grains is also important for swine. Corn has the highest energy content of any grain, followed by wheat,



barley, and finally oats. Whole grains processed into swine feeds provide more energy than grain by-products or grain parts because they contain more starch.

The tag on a sack of commercial feed provides important information about the quality of the feed. Look on the tag to determine the following items:

- Crude fiber of 5 percent or less
- The percent protein of the feed
- Either a protein source rich in amino acids such as soybean meal *or* added amino acids such as lysine or methionine (listed in the ingredients)
- The source of energy—corn, wheat, barley, or oats (listed in the ingredients)
- Medications and withdrawal times

Pigs fed a good-quality feed require about 2.5 to 3 pounds of feed for each pound of gain. They should gain from 1.5 to 2 pounds per day.

When buying pigs, it is important to ask the seller what the pigs are being fed at the time of purchase so that you can duplicate the diet as closely as possible. If you want to change the diet, introduce the new feed gradually to avoid digestive upsets. If diarrhea becomes a problem, the addition of 20 percent ground whole oats into the diet for several weeks may help. Other remedies that may be used to prevent scour problems include adding 10 percent high-quality alfalfa hay or other fiber to the ration, providing adequate feeder space for all pigs if not on a self-fed system, minimizing stress from cool temperatures, and practicing good sanitation.

## Health

The major health problems affecting newly purchased pigs, in addition to scours, are respiratory diseases. Observe animals daily for any signs of illness or unusual behavior. Some symptoms to watch for are coughing, a rise in body temperature, loss of appetite, and difficult breathing.

Be prepared to act immediately at the first sign of illness. If a pig seems to be sick, use a thermometer to take its temperature. The normal temperature for a pig is 102.5°F (plus or minus 1 degree). By knowing the pig's temperature, a veterinarian will be better able to prescribe a course of treatment.

A vaccination program is encouraged in order to protect your pigs' health. The basic vaccinations for feeder pigs are atrophic rhinitis (bordetella), actinobacillus pleuropneumoniae (APP), mycoplasmal pneumonia, and erysipelas.

Vaccines contain "safe" microorganisms that are injected into a pig to prepare its immune system to resist diseases. The safe microorganisms in vaccines are either killed or modified-live. This means they will activate the immune system but not cause the disease. A vaccination raises the pig's

immunity level by increasing its available antibodies to fight disease.

Second and third vaccinations for the same disease are called boosters. Boosters help to further increase the immunity level. Boosters are required for many vaccinations to be effective. Follow the vaccine label instructions for the timing of boosters.

In order to be effective, vaccines must be administered properly. Use the proper needle size for the age of the pig and the type of injection. Do not give injections in the ham, as damage to the ham can occur. Give intramuscular injections in the neck just behind and below the ear. Give subcutaneous injections in the loose flaps of skin in the flank or elbow.

Before bringing the pigs home, ask the seller what vaccinations were already given. This will help you decide what other vaccinations or boosters are needed.

It is especially important that show pigs have boosters prior to a fair or show. It takes from 10 to 21 days after vaccination for the pig to develop a protective immune response. The exact length of time depends on the pig's age, the type of vaccine, and whether the pig has been vaccinated before.

It also is important to treat pigs for internal and external parasites. In many cases, sanitation, proper feeding, and comfortable housing will reduce the potential for serious disease outbreaks.

As the pigs grow and summer arrives, be sure to provide plenty of water, shade, and adequate ventilation. Excessive heat can stress pigs as much as cold does.

## For more information

Raising a few feeder pigs to market weight might sound like a lot of work and worry, but it also can be fun and rewarding. If you have questions, seek advice from the Oregon State University Extension Service, a veterinarian experienced in swine health, or an experienced swine producer in your area.

## OSU Extension publications

*Hovers for Farrowing Buildings*,  
EC 1275 (1988).

*Why Ventilate Animal Buildings?*  
FS 302 (1983).

Many OSU Extension Service publications may be viewed or downloaded from the Web. Visit the online Publications and Videos catalog at <http://eesc.oregonstate.edu>.

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## Other publications

*Pork Industry Handbook*. Available from Ag Communication/Media Distribution Center, Purdue University, 231 S. University St., West Lafayette, IN 47907-2064; fax: 765-496-1540; e-mail: [Media.Order@ces.purdue.edu](mailto:Media.Order@ces.purdue.edu)

*Pork Quality Assurance Program Workbook*. Available from the National Pork Board, P.O. Box 9114, Des Moines, IA 50306; phone: 515-223-2600; e-mail: [porkboard@porkboard.org](mailto:porkboard@porkboard.org); Web: <http://www.porkboard.org/Home/default.asp>

*Swine Care Handbook*. Available from the National Pork Board, P.O. Box 9114, Des Moines, IA 50306; phone 515-223-2600; e-mail: [porkboard@porkboard.org](mailto:porkboard@porkboard.org); Web: <http://www.porkboard.org/Home/default.asp>

## Web sites

National Pork Board: <http://www.porkboard.org/Home/default.asp>  
Oregon State University Department of Animal Sciences Swine Extension program: <http://oregonstate.edu/dept/animal-sciences/swineext.htm>

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