

Safety in Handling Swine

Our topics for this week are:

- Safety measures for handlers of hogs
- Safety measures for hogs when handled

Handler Safety

Restrained swine squeal very loudly. Handlers should not cause pigs to squeal in the presence of sows for procedures such as treating pigs' navels, clipping needle teeth, docking tails, notching ears, castration, or administering injections because the mother sow or other sows may become agitated enough to become aggressive and dangerous.

Handlers should always wear moldable ear plugs when working indoors with swine. Squealing is a significant danger to hearing. For example, feeding time in a swine building can have squealing intensity that reaches 95 to 130 decibels. Hearing loss can begin at 85 decibels. If a handler must raise his voice for someone to hear him that is standing an arm's length away, the decibels are above 80 and ear protection should be worn. Cotton balls and ill-fitting plugs are inadequate protection.

When working in hog total confinement buildings, respiratory problems are a risk. Causes of respiratory difficulty in swine buildings can include dust (particularly particles of feed and fecal matter) and gases (especially ammonia from urine and hydrogen sulfide from feces). Wearing a respirator may be necessary. Disposable dust masks with 2 straps provide protection against inhaling larger particles, but do not provide protection against small particles of dust or gases.

Other injuries to handlers from hogs can be from biting or colliding with handlers. The most dominant boar should be handled first so that the smell of subordinate boars will not stimulate aggression. Breeding boars or nursing sows weigh more than 500 lb. are often aggressive and dangerous, especially if they have mishandled in the past, including not allowing them to socialize with other hogs when they were young.

Handlers should always leave themselves two exits from a hog pen, always remain within reach of stationary objects to hold to prevent being knocked down, and never back a grown hog into a corner.

Sows attempt to knock intruders in their space down and then bite them. Boars will attack intruders while they are still standing. Boars can be extremely aggressive, if provoked. Wild boars were hunted in the Middle Ages with a Boar Spear which has lugs that are short bars perpendicular to the spear blade to prevent the boar from running up the spear handle and attacking the hunter after being impaled. Adult hogs, particularly boars, if aggressive may try to bite the inner aspect of the thigh and if successful can sever the femoral artery of a handler. This can quickly lead to life-threatening hemorrhage. Handlers should always keep a barrier (panel, fence, or other partition) between the handler and a boar being handled. It is also advisable to wear knee boots and steel toed shoes when in hog or pig pens. If charged by a sow or boar, a slap on its snout with a shovel or cane may be enough distraction for a handler to quickly escape.

Gates in hog pens should only be used for moving hogs in and out. Handlers entering a

pen should climb over the pen wall or fence since hogs can escape with speed and force if the gate is unlatched for a handler to enter.

Handlers who work with hogs during breeding should not be involved when breeding sows or boars are handled for painful procedures, such as vaccination or blood collection. Hogs are more likely to remain calm if they do not associate pain or restraint with a handler.

Swine Safety

Hogs and pigs are very intelligent and individualistic. They do not herd well in groups. Each one that becomes trapped in an enclosure will look for an opening and root to try to escape. Pigs will pile on top of each other seeking escape. They have poor vision and activate “fight or flight” responses quickly. They overheat, tire easily, and can die of heat stroke if not handled with as little stress as possible and quickly.

The primary means of defense and offense of hogs is biting. Hogs are more aggressive if hungry. Hogs will become agitated and sometimes aggressive by “mob action” if a member of the group seems in distress.

Hogs and pigs should be desensitized to humans near their flight zones by handlers getting into their pen, getting the pigs up as quietly as possible, and having them move quietly around the pen, then leave when they are relatively calm.

To decrease fighting when mixing sows or pigs, groups should be established according to size, extra food should be provided during initial introduction, and hay, straw, and toys made available for mental stimulation and diversion. A new hog or pig being added to an established group is best introduced in a dark room.

The incisors and canine teeth are often clipped in one day old piglets to reduce injuries to the sow’s teats and to litter mates.

Now let’s recap the key points to remember from today’s episode:

- 1. Hog handlers in confinement facilities should wear hearing protection, a respiratory mask, and knee-high boots with steel toes.**
- 2. Hog handlers must avoid all possibilities of being knocked down by a hog.**
- 3. To reduce or eliminate hogs panicking from a handler being in a pen with them, they should be desensitized to humans early in life by frequent, non-stress related mingling by humans in their pens.**

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at: www.betteranimalhandling.com

Don’t forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.