

## **Risks of Handling Hogs Raised in Extreme Confinement**

Our topics for this week are some of the hazards of handling hogs in extreme confinement and how to prevent them, including:

- **Damage to hearing**
- **Respiratory impairment**
- **Bite wounds**

### **Effects on Hearing**

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.

### **Respiratory Hazard**

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.

### **Risk of Bites**

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.

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. 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. 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.

In total confinement operations, hogs are restricted to crates in which they are already caught and restrained or small pens in which catching is relatively easy. Regardless of whether hogs are in crates, small pens, large pens, or on pasture, care must be taken not to startle hogs, especially sows with pigs, by being too quiet or excessively noisy. Hogs will become quickly agitated by the presence of a stranger. A startle reaction in hogs is to vocalize with a woof sound, jump to feet if recumbent, and then freeze in place. Normal level noise should be made at a distance so that hogs moderate their alert response before the handler gets near them.

Special precautions should be taken to prevent being bitten on the legs and knocked down in a hog pen. When entering a pen of hogs, a handler should wear knee high boots and stay near a fence or something else that is firmly stationary to grab to maintain his balance if pushed on. A handler may carry a panel or pole to keep curious hogs from crowding him. Hogs in total confinement are deprived of normal mental stimulation and become excited by the presence of a handler whom they also associate with being fed. Smelling a handler's legs and inquisitive bites of boots are common. However, this can become dangerous if the hogs are large, have not been fed recently, or blood is present anywhere in the pen. Hogs are omnivores and will become very excited if blood is present.

Hogs can be taught to appreciate being rubbed and scratched on the back, but this must be done firmly since light touches will be suspicious of danger. Minor procedures, such as vaccinations, can be done without stress on many hogs by restricting their movement, providing food, using a soothing voice, and scratching their shoulders and behind their ears during the procedure. The handler should never put his hands within range of a hog being able to turn and bite.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at [CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com](mailto:CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com)

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

- 1. Ear protection should be worn when handling hogs confined indoors.**
- 2. Dust masks should be worn when handling hogs confined indoors.**
- 3. Knee high rubber boots and bracing your body with hand holds to stationary objects are important deterrents to being bitten or knocked down when handling hogs in close confinements.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: [www.betteranimalhandling.com](http://www.betteranimalhandling.com) . This website has more than 250 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

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.