

Pig Basics 101

Everything you ever needed to know about pigs... but didn't know who to ask!

Your room looks like a pig pen. Don't eat like a pig. We were happier than a pig in mud. Many expressions originate with the pig. Less than 3% of Canadians are farmers today, leaving very few of us who actually know the real deal about pigs. So here it is!

Pigtionary

Here are a few terms you need to know to get around a pig barn:

Barrow: male pig that has been neutered

Boar: adult male pig kept for breeding purposes

Farrow: to give birth

Feeder pig: piglet after it's weaned from the sow, also known as 'weaner' pig

Gilt: female pig that has never farrowed

Litter: group of piglets born at one time from the same sow

Market hog: barrow or gilt raised for meat production, weighs up to 110 kg

Piglet: newborn pig, weighs 1-2 kilograms

Pork producers: farmers, the people that raise pigs

Runt: smallest piglet in the litter

Sow: adult female pig (Note that 'sow' rhymes with 'cow'!)



Pigs of Many Colours

Pigs come in different styles, or breeds. Just like dogs, some are bigger, some are smaller, some are white, others are black. Some farms specialize in one breed of pig. Purebred breeding farms then sell their high quality males and females to other farmers. Most pigs raised today are a combination of two or three different breeds for the best traits from each breed.



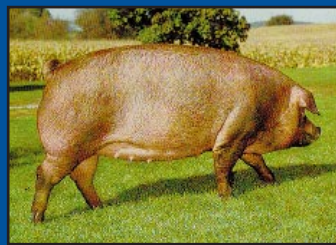
Yorkshire

The Canadian Yorkshire, the most popular breed of pig in Canada, are known to grow quickly, have many piglets, and produce very lean, high quality pork.



Landrace

Landrace are large, muscular white pigs, recognizable by their droopy ears. The Landrace breed is known for its strong maternal abilities and adapting to different climates.



Duroc

The Canadian Duroc is a solid red pig, known for fast growth, stamina and high quality meat products.



Hampshire

Hampshires are black and white pigs, known for fast growth, muscling, and really lean pork.

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Let's start at the very beginning...

Sows can be bred by natural mating with boars or by artificial insemination. Artificial insemination allows farmers to buy the best genetics in the world without having to bring a new animal into the barn.



It's easy to remember that a sow's gestation (pregnancy) lasts for approximately three months, three weeks, and three days. The average sow can have 8-12 piglets in a litter, and gives birth approximately twice a year. Sows are put in special pens called 'farrowing pens', just before giving birth and while they nurse their piglets.

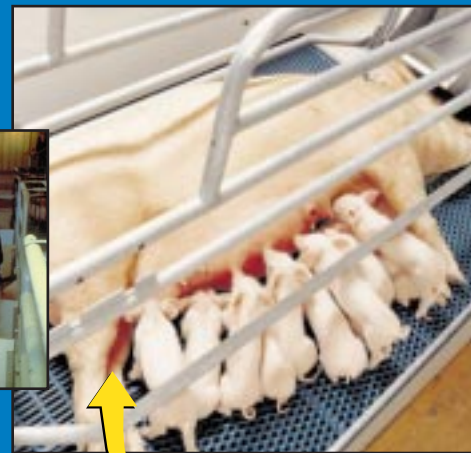
The farrowing pen is designed to provide the best environment for both the large sow and the small piglets. The bars on the pen give the sow something to lean against when she lies down, and the piglets have a safe area to stay out of harm's way. The area where the piglets sleep can be kept warm with a heat lamp or heat pad. Sows nurse their piglets for two to four weeks, until the piglets are weaned from milk and eat solid food.



Boar



Heat Lamp



Farrowing Pen

To the nursery ...



Feeder pigs receive a diet that changes to meet their nutritional needs as they grow. Once the piglets are weaned from the sow, they are moved to group pens in another room or even a separate barn altogether. These newly weaned pigs need warmer temperatures, and are healthiest when kept completely separate from older pigs. These pigs are usually kept in groups, with other pigs of the same size. It is important to keep pigs in groups with other pigs the same size as they will 'bully' each other and can really injure smaller pigs.



Manure and urine fall through this type of floor to keep pens clean and dry.

Slatted floor

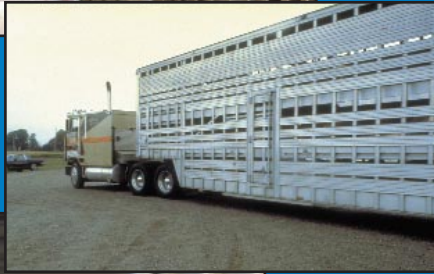


These pigs went to market ...

Farmers move the feeder pigs out of the nursery when they reach approximately 25 kg. This next stage is called the 'grower-finisher' section where pigs are housed in a separate room or a separate barn designed for that size of pig. A feeder pig is raised to market weight of 110 kg. These are the pigs that supply us with pork.

Market hogs are sent to meat processing plants on trucks designed just for pigs. There are guidelines for transporting pigs, including the number of pigs on the truck. For example, in hot weather fewer pigs are put on a truck and are often shipped at night or early morning when it is cooler.

Each animal is inspected at the processing plant. Pigs are handled and euthanized quickly and humanely by approved methods. Processing plants follow strict government guidelines for processing and handling animals and meat products. A lot of research has been done on humane handling and euthanasia. Check out Dr. Temple Grandin's website for examples: www.grandin.com.



This little pig stayed home ...

The pigs with the best genetics and desirable pig characteristics are called 'breeding stock'. These pigs remain in the farmer's herd or are sold to other farmers to add to their herd or replace existing pigs. Good breeding stock pigs are kept for different reasons. Farmers look for pigs with characteristics such as a good body and bone structure, muscling, quick growth, or strong maternal instincts.



Houses of Straw, Sticks, or Bricks?

Only pigs in storybooks or movies live in houses, talk, and wear clothes. Most real pigs in Canada live in barns, not outside in the mud. Why, you ask? Barns are designed to provide pigs with the right environment, protected from extreme weather and temperature.

Sweat like a Pig?

Guess what? Pigs don't sweat! Storybook pigs are often shown in the mud as they try to keep cool and out of the sun. Real pigs actually like to keep clean. Today's pig barns help keep pigs cool in the summer and warm in the winter with lots of fans to help circulate the air. Did we mention some barns even have water sprinklers to help keep pigs cool and comfortable?



Temperature and fan control

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Eat like a Pig?

If you only ate healthy foods from the four food groups and no snack food, then you can say you ate like a pig! Pigs eat grains like corn, barley and soybeans, mixed in with vitamins and minerals. Pig feed is usually all mixed together, often into a pellet, kind of like dog food. Animal feed can be purchased from a feed mill or mixed on-farm. A lot of scientific research has helped farmers know the exact amount and type of food a pig needs as it grows.



Straight from the Pig Pen



Pigs need many of the same things that a pet might, such as a balanced diet, clean water, a health program, and the right type of environment. Farmers work hard to provide all these necessities every day of the year. Vaccinations and medications are used in herd health programs with a veterinarian's advice. Animal medicine, like human medicine, must be tested and approved by government before use.

Animal Health Record

Did you say shower before you go into a pig barn?

Some farmers might ask you to take a shower or put on plastic boots over your shoes before you go into their barn. Other farms do not allow any visitors at all, people or animals. Any guesses why?



This is called 'biosecurity', and it's one part of a herd health program that helps to keep pigs healthy. Not allowing visitors into the barn helps to keep germs or sickness out. Farmers give their pigs medicine when they are sick, but prefer prevention over treatment.

Pigs = Pork and ...

Of course the primary purpose for raising pigs is to provide us with food, or pork to be specific. Ham, bacon, sausage, pepperoni and pork chops all come from pigs. Farmers are paid for the quality of the pork they produce. Canadian farmers produce some of the highest quality pork in the world. Virtually everything from each pig is used to provide us with many items including: leather, soap, medicines and medical treatments like heart valves.



It's a Living, a Life, and so much more...

Canada's 15,000 pork producers sold approximately 21 million market hogs in 1999. Pig farms today are larger than in the past. Most farms are owned by a single family. Others are managed by several families or hire additional workers to help care for the animals or crops. If you would like to be a successful pork producer, you need to enjoy working with animals. Many of today's farmers go to college or university to study agriculture, animal science, plant science, and business.

Farming is definitely a business and a way of life.

For more information contact:

