

Pig Production in Canada

Life Cycle of a Pig

Raising pigs for meat production includes several stages: **Gestation** (pregnancy of the sow), **farrowing** (giving birth to the piglets), **nursery** (caring for young piglets) and **grow-finish** (growth of weaned piglets to slaughter weight).

The gestation phase begins with the breeding of a sow. The gestation period of a sow is 115 days (3 months, 3 weeks and 3 days), and the average litter size is 10-12 piglets. Sows usually have two litters of piglets per year. Piglets nurse from the sow for 3 to 4 weeks before being weaned off milk. The piglets are then kept in a nursery for 4 to 8 weeks while they start to eat solid foods.

The grow-finishing stage begins after their stay in the nursery. The piglets are separated into similar-sized groups and are given high energy feed until they reach the market weight (about 110-120 kg).

It takes approximately 5 to 6 months to raise a pig from farrow to finish. Once the pigs have reached market weight they are transported to the abattoir. The carcasses are then packaged by meat packers, grocery stores or butcher shops and are sold to the public.

Many farmers raise their pigs from farrow to finish. Some farmers only raise the piglets until they are weaned, then another producer finishes them until they reach the market weight.

Breeding

In the breeding area, sows/gilts are housed in groups, or in individual stalls, with boars in close proximity. When the sows/gilts are in estrus, the boar is released into the pen for breeding. Most farms keep one boar for every 20 sows.

Increasingly, larger farms are practicing artificial insemination – impregnating sows manually with semen collected from a boar.

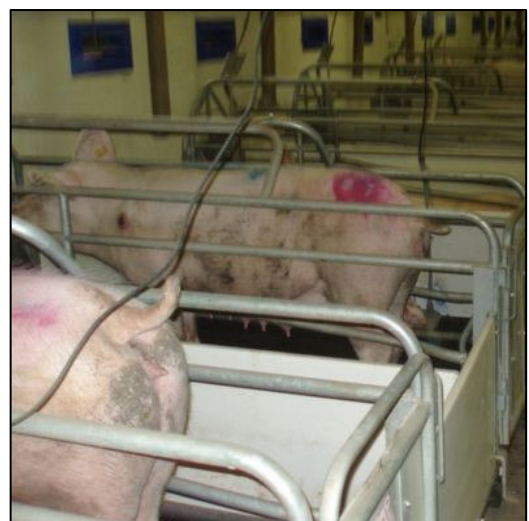
Housing

The majority of pigs are raised in indoor barns where the producer can control feed, temperature, lighting and ventilation. Confinement housing has advantages in terms of disease control, increased efficiency and pregnancy uptake (first 4-5 weeks of pregnancy) although it does have welfare implications. There are several housing systems associated with each stage of production.

1. Gestation stall

Sows are typically housed in individual stalls (26-28 inches wide by 7 feet long) with metal bars and cement floors for most of their lives. The cement flooring has slots to let manure fall through.

They can lie down, stand up or sit, and may be able to walk a few steps forward and back. However, they typically do not have enough room to turn around. Because they have very little control over their environment, they may experience stress from a number of factors, including: being housed next to an aggressive neighbour, inability to avoid a wet lying area or inability to avoid insects. The majority of farmers use gestation stalls while others may keep their sows in some form of group-housing system. However, concerns about aggression and costs of infrastructure changes tend to be major barriers to adopting alternative housing systems, such as group housing.



2. Farrowing Crate

Sows are moved into the farrowing (birthing) facility a few days before farrowing is expected. The size of the crate is similar to the gestation stall but has creep areas along the sides for piglets and adjustable guardrails to protect the piglets from getting crushed. A heat lamp or pad is provided to keep the piglets warm. The sows are often moved back to the stalls once the piglets are weaned, or may be housed temporarily in group pens.



3. Nursery

The weaned piglets are sorted by weight and housed in nursery pens until they are 8-10 weeks of age. Solid feed and water is provided at all times while the weanlings complete the transition from milk to solid foods. The temperature is kept warm, as in the farrowing facility, according to scientifically recommended temperatures.

4. Grower / Finisher barn

Grower and finisher pigs are housed in groups of 16 or more. Some producers may provide straw, rope, chain or other appropriate enrichment items to prevent oral behaviours (e.g. tail biting) between pen-mates. Pens are usually fitted with slatted floors to keep them clean of manure.

Feeding

Feed is either supplied by feed companies or prepared in on-farm feed mills. It consists of a balanced mix of grains such as barley, wheat, corn, canola meal and even peas or lentils.

Sows are fed limited amounts of feed typically once a day to keep their weight moderate – this helps to prevent farrowing difficulty, also known as dystocia. **Growing pigs** are provided with high-energy feed at all times to maximize weight gains.

Weanlings in the nursery are provided with ‘creep feed,’ which is more palatable to encourage smooth transition to solid food.

Nursery feeds may contain some antibiotics in addition to vitamins and mineral supplements to protect young piglets from illnesses. However, in Canada, feed rations for growers / finishers do not contain any antibiotics or hormones.



Piglets

Piglets are raised by the sow until weaning at 3 or 4 weeks. Piglets may also be ‘cross-fostered’ (switching piglets from one sow to another) shortly after birth to ensure that all piglets get adequate access to milk.

Producers generally make sure that all piglets receive enough colostrum (first milk the sow produces after giving birth, which contains high concentrations of nutrients and antibodies) so that they have good immune protection.

Within the first week of life, piglets provided an iron solution injection to prevent anemia, their tails are clipped to avoid future tail biting, and male piglets are castrated.

For more information on the welfare concerns associated with these practices, please see our factsheet on The Welfare of Pigs in Canada.