

Mysterious disease kills finisher pigs

Nightmare: The biggest and finest grower finisher pigs die without any signs of disease just prior to slaughter.

By Anne Olsen

According to an article by John Waddell, DVM, at the nationalhogfarmer.com, 75 percent of all mortalities in some grower finisher units are caused by the apprehended disease HBS (hemorrhagic bowel syndrome).

This disease has been observed in grower finisher pigs in the age of four to six months. The most interesting characteristic about the disease is that the biggest and finest pigs die without any symptoms, just prior to slaughter.

A terrible experience

Grower finisher pigs that die from HBS have a distended abdomen and the colour of the skin has a characteristic pale colour. According to John Waddell, performing a post-mortem examination on the pigs is not any better.

“Whenever I autopsy these pigs, the producers always tend to step back a few feet”, John Waddell explains.

Apparently, no prophylactic or curative treatments have been identified. The lack of treatments is probably a result of American veterinarians disagreeing about the cause of the disease, discussing whether the disease is caused by an infection or by the gastro intestinal tract being twisted 180 degrees.

Disagreeing on the cause

Some veterinarians believe that toxins produced by bacteria like clostridia and E. coli cause this awful disease. They have a theory saying that these bacteria are to some extent present in the gut. A sudden and abrupt change in the microbial balance in the gut could then produce a high content of toxins, which causes the death of the pig.

These veterinarians have with some success tried to prevent the disease by treating the pigs with antibiotics prior to slaughter. However, the pigs suffering from the HBS syndrome die suddenly and without any signs of disease, so it is very difficult to know when to treat the animals to obtain an effect.

Pigs dying from HBS have often the stomach full of digesta at the time of death and the intestines are furthermore not placed in the right position. Additionally, the HBS mortalities most often occur when the weather is warm and in periods where the feeding schedules have been out of order.

Based on these observations, some veterinarians believe that a twisted gastro intestinal system causes a sudden bleeding in the intestines and consequently a sudden death. Other veterinarians mention that heavy finisher pigs ingest few but large meals. This eating behaviour could eventually cause a twist of the gastro intestinal tract.

Do not know the cure

The Americans have apparently no certain explanation for the disease. Therefore, their list of “fast solutions” is getting longer. Many pig producers and veterinarians have over time believed that they had found a cure. The enthusiasm for new discoveries only lasted a short while until the disease hit back again.

American pig producers have tried almost everything such as medication in the drinking water and in the feed, different breeds, different feeding strategies and last but not least,

various “magical powders”. None of these initiatives have really solved the problem. An apparently short-term effect against HBS has often been observed in coincidence with an incidental decline in the frequency of the disease.

The biggest problem for the American scientists is apparently that the prevalence of the disease is relatively small. As a result of this, the scientists have not succeeded in creating such conditions that are favourable for an outbreak of the disease. Because these specific conditions have not been identified it has not been possible to find a cure.

No reason for apprehension

Even though the disease has created panic in USA, there is no reason for apprehension. In USA the treatment of the disease is apparently as unknown as the disease itself. However, according to the Danish veterinarian Karsten Dalby, this disease is well known in Denmark and so is its cure.

The disease creating panic in the US is simply caused by clostridia, which can be prevented with lactic acid bacteria. Karsten Dalby believes that treatment with antibiotics is a solution working only for a short period of time.

“An outbreak of the disease is very often caused by an imbalance in the gastro intestinal tract. This can be caused by an imbalance in the micro flora present in the feeding system”, Karsten Dalby says.

If liquid feeding is used and the pigs show signs of the hemorrhagic bowel syndrome the mixing tank and feeding tubes must be cleaned and disinfected. After these procedures have been carried out, the liquid feed must be inoculated with lactic acid bacteria, Karsten Dalby asserts.

Karsten Dalby recommends to add 2 kg BioPlus 2B per ton feed for a period of 14 days if the HBS syndrome occurs in connection with dry feed. After the 14 days period BioPlus 2B should be included with 400 gram per ton feed for at least one month.

It was previously called twisted gut

If you perform a post-mortem examination you will observe that the intestines are twisted and therefore it used to be called “twisted gut”, Karsten Dalby explains.

The twist of the gut most likely occurs during the death due to a production of gas in the intestines.

“The HBS disease was much more common in Denmark when we used meat and bone meal.

When the pig producers abandoned feed with meat and bone meal, the disease declined.

However, the occurrence of HBS once more increased when the content of Copper in the feed was substantially reduced”, Karsten Dalby says.