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Introduction

Pigs suffering from salt poisoning or water deprivation can be severely affected and in some animals it can be fatal. Detecting the early signs of compromised animals will allow for immediate action to be taken to help those suffering to recover and to reduce the risk of other stock succumbing to the condition.

Cause

Salt poisoning or water deprivation occurs when weaner, grower or finisher pigs are deprived of water for more than 24 hours, for example as the result of a pump breakdown or pipe blockage. The same syndrome is seen when pigs take in excess salt via either the feed or water or both. The highest death rate and the worst clinical signs occur if unlimited water is immediately reintroduced to pigs after a period of water deprivation. The higher the salt content in the feed, the worse the poisoning.

Clinical signs

The initial clinical signs are those of thirst, constipation, skin irritation and lack of appetite. Nervous signs follow, especially when unrestricted water is suddenly available after a period without water. These nervous signs include ear twitching, aimless wandering, bumping into objects, dog-sitting, falling over sideways and often apparent deafness and blindness. Sometimes affected pigs may move round in a circle using one foot as a pivot and they may convulse. Convulsions re-occur with remarkable regularity at approximately seven minute intervals.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis of salt poisoning is initially by history and clinical signs, followed by the confirmation of characteristic microscopic changes in the brains of pigs that have died.

Treatment

Water must be reintroduced gradually to pigs that have been without water for more than 24 hours. Severely dehydrated animals need to be rehydrated gradually; they must not ingest large quantities of water quickly. Electrolytes in water can be used for rehydrating affected animals. Pigs exhibiting nervous signs should be placed in a darkened area with bedding material to help prevent or minimise injuries.