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Cathy M. Dwyer
Moira Harris
S. AbdulRahman
Susanne Waiblinger
T. Bas Rodenburg



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Sow and Piglet Behaviour and Weight: Implications of Different Ages of Weaning

Sunday, 1st August - 18:00: Early Life and Maternal Care - Oral

Thursday, 5th August - 14:00: Early Life and Maternal Care - Oral

Thursday, 5th August - 15:45: Early Life and Maternal Care - Oral

Ms. Rebecka Hellgren¹, Dr. Anna Wallenbeck¹, Ms. Linda Marie Hannius¹

1. Department of Animal Environment and Health, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Box 7068, 750 07 Uppsala, SE, Sweden

Weaning age affects both behaviour and physiology in piglets. Weaning earlier than the age of 21 days has been shown to increase aggressive behaviours, belly-nosing, plasma cortisol, growth and feed intake. The effects of weaning age on sows within the span used in commercial piglet production (3-6 weeks) have not been investigated thoroughly when sows and piglets are housed and managed under the typical conditions in Swedish piglet production. This pilot project investigates the effects of weaning age on the behaviour and weight of piglets and sows under conditions similar to Swedish commercial production. The project also investigates potential conflicts between the needs of the sow and piglets during the nursing period. Sows with piglets housed in individual loose housing pens were weaned 3 (n=5), 4 (n=5) and 5 (n=5) weeks after farrowing. Behaviour was videotape recorded from farrowing until six weeks after farrowing. The sows' weight and backfat thickness were registered at farrowing and weaning. Piglets were weighed at birth and week 3, 4, 5, 6 and 9 after birth. Sow and piglet health was monitored throughout the project. The sows were of Yorkshire breed, and the piglets had Hampshire sires. The videos were analysed with both continuous observations and scan samplings.

The results of this study indicate that piglets weaned at 21 days of age spend more time standing up, eating solid food, fighting, belly nosing and mounting after weaning than piglets weaned at 35 days of age. Piglets weaned at 28 days of age were belly nosing more after weaning than those weaned at 35 days of age. Piglets weaned at 21 days of age had a significantly higher growth rate between 28 days and 9 weeks of age than piglets weaned on days 28 and 35. There were no statistically significant results regarding the sows on behaviour, weight, or backfat thickness. However, the descriptive statistics show that sows weaned from their piglets on day 35 had less backfat than those weaned on days 28 and 21. They also showed that sows spent less time having snout contact with the piglets and laid down less the longer they stayed with the piglets. Since this is a pilot study, the results found should be interpreted with caution. However, the results show a need for further research to confirm whether these findings apply to larger populations in Swedish production systems.