

## Small and surplus piglets are not redundant piglets!

In recent years litter sizes in sow farming have increased considerably due to genetic progress. More piglets per sow often results in an increase in the proportion of light piglets as well. These piglets are less vital, thereby increasing the risk of these piglets dying in the farrowing pen. Also, it often occurs that sows have more piglets than functional teats. These piglets are called surplus piglets. Small and surplus piglets require extra attention from the sow farmer, but with the right care, these piglets can be raised as well.

With large litters, during gestation fewer nutrients and less oxygen are available to the piglets in the uterus. This results in a lower average birth weight. The lower the birth weight of a piglet, the higher the chance of this piglet dying before weaning. This is because small piglets have lower reserves of energy, making them more susceptible to a lower ambient temperature. They also take in less colostrum and take it in later. Colostrum intake is essential to both the intake of antibodies and the intake of energy and the development of the intestine. So piglets with a low colostrum intake are less vital, and have a higher risk of being overlaid by the dam. Piglets that are warm and dry quickly will take up colostrum more quickly, so make sure that the temperature in the farrowing pens is always sufficiently high.

In addition, with large litters, later on less milk is available per piglet. This often results in increased mortality in the farrowing pen and lower weaning weights of the piglets. Moreover, animals with a lower weaning weight have a slower growth in the rearing and fattening stages. So measures are needed to be able to wean fine and vital piglets from large litters as well.

Various possible ways to take care of light and surplus piglets are listed below.



### 1. Cross-fostering piglets:

This is the most widely used system to take care of surplus piglets and to achieve uniform litter sizes, and occurs at nearly all farms. A priority with regard to this is that the piglets are able to take in colostrum from the dam first and are therefore cross-fostered no earlier than after 24 hours. In addition, cross-fostering preferably takes place within the first two days of life, before the teat order of the piglets is fixed. Usually the largest piglets from healthy litters are cross-fostered. When cross-fostering, care should be taken it does not cause the spread of germs, such as streptococci or E. Coli, in the farrowing pen.

### 2. Alternating suckling:

With alternating suckling, not all piglets can drink milk at the same time. The litter is divided into groups and these alternately allowed to be with the sow. Another possibility is to leave the lightest piglets with the sow continuously and to periodically separate the biggest piglets only. This allows the lightest piglets to take up sufficient milk as well. Alternating suckling is a very labour-intensive system, though. The alternating intake of colostrum is also a valuable measure for large litters. The first-born piglets are marked and are separated after some time. This allows piglets that were born later to take up sufficient colostrum as well. Do make sure that the separated piglets are not put in a cold environment. So do not put them in the feed alley, but preferably behind a partition in the piglet nest area, under a heat lamp.

### 3. Use of foster sows:

As foster sows, often sows that have farrowed 3 weeks earlier are selected. Sows that have had 2, 3 or 4 parities are perfect. This is because these sows have the best quality of milk. It is important for the foster sow to have good mother qualities, a good udder and a calm character. This calm character is needed to reduce the number of piglets being overlaid by the dam. It is advised to restrict the feed supply and accordingly the milk production of the sow in the first days. This allows the piglets to properly empty the udder. If the udder is not emptied properly, this may be a sign for the sow that she is being weaned. This will reduce the milk production, and the sow may go into heat. The feed supply can be increased again later on. It is again important to allow the piglets to take in colostrum first, and therefore to place them with the foster sow no earlier than after 24 hours.



### 4. Liquid supplementary feed:

In large litters, less milk is available per piglet, causing the weaning weight of the piglets to be reduced. Providing piglets with pap while they are with the sow results in more uniform piglets and higher weaning weights. Providing milk replacer feed also allows piglets to stay with the sow as much as possible and limits the use of foster sows and artificial sows (see below). This is beneficial to both the piglets and the carry-over of diseases on the farm. Do not give this pap constantly, and not too early. Piglets still need to drink sufficient milk from the sow, both for their immunity and to stimulate the sow's milk production. Other considerations are that the milk is sufficiently warm, is provided fresh several times a day, and stays homogeneous for a long time. This promotes its intake by piglets.

### 5. Early weaning (Orphaned piglets):

Early weaning can be done at different ages, ranging from 3 days to 14 days. Depending on their age, the piglets are reared using rescue decks, incubators, artificial sows, in a pre-weaning battery, or the regular battery. Ideally weaning at 3 days is only done if there are no other options. This is because suckling the sow is still best for the health and the growth of the piglets. With early weaning, it is recommended to wean the largest piglets. In principle, systems where piglets younger than 3 weeks are weaned are not permitted in the European Union.

The care for light piglets is important. However, it is less expensive and simpler to avoid light piglets as much as possible. A good and proper nutrition of the sow during gestation and lactation is especially important for this. For this it is essential to make sure the sow has a suitable condition in the farrowing pen, and to make sure that the sow's energy intake is sufficient during lactation. This subject will be addressed in more depth in a later newsletter.

In the PORCITO range, *Nuscience* has excellent products for rearing large litters. **Babimel Cream** is a soluble prestarter for liquid supplementary feeding of piglets with the sow. This prestarter stays homogeneous for a long time, making it very user-friendly. In addition, the choice of tasty and easily digestible ingredients ensures a good intake by the piglets. **Babimel Lac** is a milk replacer feed that can be used for orphaned piglets in automatic feeding systems. Stability and tastiness are the great strengths of this product as well.