



# TIMELY EUTHANASIA, WHY, WHEN AND HOW



1/13/2019

The Importance of Timely Euthanasia for  
Animal Health and Welfare

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# Timely Euthanasia, Why, When and How

## THE IMPORTANCE OF TIMELY EUTHANASIA FOR ANIMAL HEALTH AND WELFARE

### Why Should We Euthanize Animals?

I've been working in the pork industry for well over twenty years and all of the producers that I've worked with care deeply about properly caring for their animals. One of the key characteristics of good farm workers is a strong desire to work closely with and provide excellent care to animals. As animal caretakers, we are driven to help each animal succeed and perform by helping them recover from sickness or injury. It should be no surprise that those same employees that care so deeply about the animals in their care are often the one's that struggle so much with the unpleasant reality of needing to occasionally euthanize animals. It's ironic, but some of the worst examples of animal suffering I've encountered have been the result of a worker's

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Timely euthanasia is important for two primary reasons 1) Animal Welfare and 2) Herd Health. If we don't properly euthanize animals in a timely manner, they suffer

unnecessarily and that is inhumane and unacceptable. Pigs in need of euthanasia are also far more likely to be carriers of diseases that represent a risk to the rest of the herd. If those animals are not responding to treatment and no other resources are available to effectively treat them, they must be properly and humanely euthanized. The worst thing we can do from an animal health prospective is move those animals to another building or hold them over to add to another group. All in all out is a powerful management strategy but it must be strictly adhered to and animals must never be moved between groups. If the animals don't meet the requirements for the next stage of production, they must be properly euthanized.

The industry has made great strides in proper euthanasia in North America and Europe, but this is still a serious issue in many parts of Asia where I often consult, most notably in China. The mentality of many producers in China is to keep every pig alive as long as possible regardless of their condition. As I mentioned before, not only is this a serious animal welfare concern, it's also a significant animal health risk that must be addressed.

### When Should We Euthanize Animals?

We should euthanize animals when we've exhausted all reasonable treatment options and not observed improvement in the condition. This can obviously be a judgement call but some experts have given us some guidelines to observe. The United States National Pork Board and the American Association of Swine Veterinarians recommends euthanasia for:

- Pigs that have no prospect for improvement or that are not responding to care and treatment after two days of intensive care unless otherwise recommended by a veterinarian. The caretaker’s past experiences with similar conditions should be used to make informed decisions about the likelihood of recovery.
- Severely injured or non-ambulatory pigs with the inability to recover. An animal is considered non-ambulatory if it cannot get up or if it can stand with support but is unable to bear weight on two of its legs.
- Any pigs that is non-ambulatory with a body condition score of 1.
- Pigs with hernias that are perforated or with large hernias that touch the ground while standing and cause difficulty walking and are ulcerated.
- Any pigs with an untreated prolapse that has become necrotic or any pig with a uterine prolapse.

The herd veterinarian is a valuable resource for farm workers who have questions about the appropriate timing of euthanasia. If a veterinarian is not immediately available, the Farm Manager, supervisor or more experienced technician can also assist in making an appropriate judgment. The most important thing is making sure we avoid the most extreme and obvious cases.

**How Should We Euthanize Animals?**

The decision on how to euthanize pigs is driven by several primary concerns:

- Worker Safety
- Animal Welfare
- Skills/Training of the Technicians
- Willingness of the Technicians
- Availability of Necessary Equipment/Tools
- Size and Weight of the Animal
- Number of Animals Requiring Euthanasia

Each farm must determine their own euthanasia plan and develop a document outlining the policy. It is important to clearly define in advance what steps will be taken when an animal needs to be euthanized. This policy should outline:

- Who is Responsible for Determining that an Animal Requires Euthanasia?

Method	Approved For...
Carbon Dioxide (CO <sub>2</sub> )	All ages but may not be practical for pigs over 70 lbs (32 kg)
Gunshot	Nursery Pigs or Older
Non-penetrating captive bolt	Pigs less than 70 lbs (32 kg)
Penetrating captive bolt	Pigs >12 lbs (5.5 kg)
Electrocution (Head to Heart)	Pigs >3 Days of Age
Electrocution (Head Only)	Pigs >3 Days of Age with a Secondary Step
Anesthetic Overdose (Must be Administered by a Veterinarian)	All ages but may not be practical
Manual blunt force trauma	Pigs up to 12 lbs (5.5 kg)

**Table 1:** Euthanasia methods appropriate to different size pigs Source: On Farm Euthanasia of Swine-Recommendations for Producers, National Pork Board

- Who is Responsible for Administering the Euthanasia and What Training they Require?
- What Method(s) Will be Used on What Animals (At least one secondary method should be assigned for each primary method for each class of animal)?
- The Specific Steps that Must Be Followed to Administer Euthanasia
- The Specific Steps that Must Be Followed to Confirm Effectiveness of the Procedure

Confirming the effectiveness of the euthanasia procedure is an important but often overlooked step in the process. Immediately after completing the procedure (within 30 seconds), the technician should confirm “insensibility”. Insensibility can be confirmed by noting an absence of rhythmic breathing, constricted pupils, raising the head, vocalization, response to touching the eyelashes or a response to a pain sensation such as reaction to a pin prick. If any of these behaviors are observed, the procedure should be repeated, or a secondary procedure applied.

Within 3 minutes and before a dead animal is moved, death must be confirmed. This can be achieved by checking for vital signs such as breathing, heartbeat, muscle movement, pain response, vocalization or corneal reflex (response to a touch on the surface of the cornea).

### Summary

On-farm euthanasia is an unpleasant, but necessary activity to ensure the health and welfare of the animals on a farm. While good management practices and excellent animal husbandry skills can limit the need for euthanasia, some euthanasia will be required and a complete absence of euthanasia on a farm is a clear sign of poor animal welfare and likely of unnecessary animal health challenges. Fortunately, there are many resources available to producers to help them to establish an effective policy. If the resources below are insufficient or if you require additional help developing a program for your farm, SwineTex Consulting Services would be happy to help; our contact info is below.

### Sources

[On Farm Euthanasia of Swine – Recommendations for the Producer](#). Booklet #04970-11/16. American Association of Swine Practitioners and the National Pork Producers Council, Des Moines, IA, 2016.

Grandin, T. [Euthanasia and Slaughter of Livestock](#). J Am Vet Med Assoc, 1994; 204:1354-1360.

Morgan Morrow, W.E., Meyer, R.E and Lascelles, D. [What pigs to euthanize and when](#). Proceedings of the North Carolina Health Hogs Seminary, October 26, 2007.

*For further information on this or any other pork production-related topic or to inquire about our services, please visit our website at [www.swinetex.com](http://www.swinetex.com) or email us at [info@swinetex.com](mailto:info@swinetex.com).*