

## Season 1, Episode 6: The Impact of Weaning Age

Dr. Mike Tokach, Kansas State University, and Dr. Adam Moeser, Michigan State, discuss the impacts of weaning age and management.



### **Industry Trends**

Weaning age is a known factor that has an impact on pig performance all the way through the finisher stage. In the United States, weaning age has gradually decreased from 8 weeks to 3 weeks of age. Weaning during this critical period in the piglet's life can change the function and trajectory of the gut. Premature weaning can negatively influence intestinal function and gut health, significantly impacting pigs later in life. Therefore, 25 days is the recommended benchmark for weaning age.

### **Weaning age considerations**

For the majority of the industry, the availability of space in the facility determines weaning age. Facilities are designed to hold weaned pigs until a certain age and follow strict schedules. Day 25 seems to be when the piglet is ready to be weaned, and mortality rate is lower after at this point. Day 25 is also the recommended time frame for weaning based on piglet's gut health, showing the most improved intestinal barrier defense. Healthy groups of piglets, with mortality under 4% at weaning, may not see as much benefit later in life from weaning. Later weaning age will benefit producers whose piglets are experiencing challenges later in life and have a higher mortality rate.

### **Gut health**

The gastrointestinal tract may not be fully developed until 3 months of age and is a significant barrier system within the body. Leaky gut is a term used to define how permeable the epithelial layers in the gut are, which is an important defense mechanism for the gut. Leakiness of the gut can be influenced by the stress on the piglet. Microscopic holes in the intestinal barrier can allow bacteria and toxins to get through the intestine and into the body, compromising the health of the piglet. Earlier weaning age can result in piglets having intestinal barrier issues later in life. Intestinal digestion and absorption of nutrients is also influenced by weaning age.

### **Economic impact**

As a producer, it is important to evaluate the pig's performance from nursery through finisher. Literature has shown, each day weaning age is increased, you increase the pig's weight out of farrowing by half a pound per pig, weight out of the nursery by two pounds per pig and weight sold per pig weaned by three to four pounds. The increased weight sold at weaning is mainly due to the decreased mortality rate by half a percentage for each day increase, up to a 25-day weaning age. Weaning age can positively influence the overall cost of each pig, by not having to treat as many pigs and resulting increases in feed intake due to gut health. Acknowledging the positive economic impact increased weaning age can have on your production system, can result in increased profits for your operation.

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