

YOU, YOUR PIG, AND YOUR VETERINARIAN

~ *by Chris Christensen*

What every pet owner hates and every pig and pig owner hate even more, is going to the vet. First understand that I am not a veterinarian and I am writing this from the standpoint of a pig owner with a lot of experience with his own pigs and with many rescue pigs. Through the rescue I also have a fairly close relationship with many veterinarians and sanctuaries and with club members and their experiences. I also have dealings with clubs and breeders throughout the country and their veterinary experiences.

Anyway, the general rule is that once a year your pig should see a veterinarian for a general exam and perhaps shots, hoof and tusk trimming, and teeth, ear and eye cleaning. How much is needed and how it is accomplished varies from pig to pig, vet-to-vet and owner-to-owner.

- There are many questions about vet care. Some of them are:
- Is your vet mobile (comes to your home) or office based (you go to them)?
- Does your vet use anesthetics (Isoflurane gas or injectable anesthetics), or do they restrain the pig (or do you restrain the pig)?
- Is your pig harness trained?
- Does your pig travel well?
- Does it ride in a vehicle uncrated or in a crate?
- Do you have a crate?
- Can you get your pig in a crate?
- Will the police come if you try and put your pig in a crate?
- What dangers could a visit with the vet pose to your pig?
- What dangers will not going to the vet pose to your pig?

MOBILE VETS

The first question is, do you have a mobile vet in your area who knows about potbellied pigs and is willing to come to your home? If the answer is yes, does this vet have a portable Isoflurane unit? This may or may not be necessary, but for some procedures it is very important. What procedures can a mobile vet perform? It depends on the vet, the size, age and health of your pig and possibly on your ability to help with the procedures. First, be aware that if this animal is a dearly beloved member of the family, you are probably going to be uncomfortable with your pig being force-fully restrained for these procedures.

PIGS ARE PREY ANIMALS

When a pig is grabbed and restrained forcefully, a part of their mind tells them that this is the end. What is the present advice to people being victimized by rapists or attackers - SCREAM AND FIGHT. That is what your pig is going to do when you try to force it to do something. Most of us have learned to talk to our pigs, bribe our pigs or somehow convince our pigs that what we want is really their idea. Some owners have so much trust built up with their pigs that hoof trimming, shots and even tusk trimming are not a problem. This is unusual, but some pigs cooperate with the procedures. Most pigs don't.

If it is preferred not to use anesthetics and to work on the pig with it conscious, you must realize that forcefully restraining one of these animals can, in extreme cases, be fatal to the animal. It is even recommended not to do this with older animals. Restraining the animal and holding it should be done cleanly and forcefully. Grab the animal and lift its front legs off the ground by holding it under its front legs in the arm pit area, roll it on to its butt and hold it securely between your legs (you can sit on a SOLID chair, sofa or bench if you wish). Having a pig harness on the animal can help you maintain control but

chasing the pig around for twenty minutes or having it escape because you relaxed your hold to scratch your nose is going to just add to the stress for everyone. If you cannot help your vet with this, either get an experienced vet who can do it on their own (rare, but they exist) or opt for a vet with a portable Isoflurane unit (also rare). My wife and I have on occasion tried to help people hold their own pig to trim hooves only to have the owner suddenly let go of the pig because they couldn't stand to hear it scream. The bigger and less sociable the pig, the harder this job becomes.

Also be aware that if an emergency occurs during these procedures a mobile vet will probably be limited in lifesaving procedures they can perform in your home as compared to a fully equipped veterinary office or an animal hospital.

If it is necessary to use anesthetic on your pig so that it will be asleep during the procedures, what type of anesthetic will be used? Every knowledgeable pig association, group or owner that I have dealt with in the last ten years has concluded that the safest anesthetic is Isoflurane gas. There is a mix of injectables that is considered fairly safe if used properly, but it is not recommended. The problem with Isoflurane gas is that the pig must be willing to be held and hold still while a mask is placed over its snout for one or two minutes while it breathes the gas and falls asleep. All of our pigs are comfortable with this procedure. In fact, Chuckles seems to like it a little too well. We think he may be becoming an Isoflurane addict. Just say, "No!" Chuckles.

Some vets prefer to give a pre-shot of injectable anesthetic so that it is easier to administer the Isoflurane. This is not necessarily recommended by pig owners but may be required if your pig cannot be easily controlled by you or the vet so that the mask can be used. (See the following article by Dr. George.) A mobile vet with or without Isoflurane should be able to give shots, trim hooves and clean eyes and ears. It will be noisy, and earplugs are recommended.

Tusks are a more delicate problem. Cutting tusks with the pig awake is how we lost our first pig, T.S. Piggliot. Other members have also had bad experiences with this. The only recommendation I could give on this is to use an OB cutting wire (available at most vet supply/feed stores) and cover the back of the mouth area (with a cloth) to keep the cut tusk from being inhaled into the lung by the screaming pig. **Do not attempt to cut the tusk close to the gum line with bolt cutters.** The danger of the tusk splitting is far too great. If tusks are not an issue with you and you merely wish to blunt the tip that protrudes from the mouth, cutters or a file of some type may be appropriate.

TRANSPORTING YOUR PIG

If you are unable to find a mobile vet, often the case in more urban areas, you may be lucky enough to find an experienced vet who will see your pet pig at their office. The next problem is getting the pig to the vet's office. Some pigs will jump right into a vehicle. Others will walk up a ramp. Some will easily get into a crate. Some will wear a harness and leash, and some won't do any of the above. If you get the animal to the vets in your car without having it confined to a crate, can you control it once you get there? We have found that having the pig in a crate is preferable, but others just walk their pig in on a leash. If your pig is not leash-trained and you need to use a crate, but your pig is not crate-trained, HELP!

Fighting a pig into a crate is usually a disaster. Bribing a pig into a crate only works once but giving the pig nowhere else to go but into the crate is usually quiet and calm. First, make sure you have a big enough crate. Then make sure you have a vehicle that will hold the crate. The "700" or "Giant" size crate will be too high for many SUV's and covered pickups. Try it before you get the pig loaded. Then make sure you have enough strong backs to lift it. One of these large crates weighs around fifty pounds. Add a full-grown potbellied pig at 100 to 150 lbs. or more and you have a two-to-three-person project. (I made a special roller dolly and an 8' ramp with a rope and pulley assembly so my wife and I can load our boys.)

How do you make a pig want to enter a crate? We have discovered a few ways. The big secret is to set it up right the first time and not fail. Pigs tend to go forward. They can't see behind them. A little prodding with a pig crowding board (a 2' x 3' piece of plywood or even a garbage can lid) lightly tapped (not taped) on their behinds and used to block their vision if they try to turn will do wonders to guide them. Some of our members can guide a pig with a cane by tapping its shoulders on one side and then the other. The main thing to do is keep the pig and you **CALM**. No chasing, running or yelling.

Get the pig and the crate in a pen or area of the backyard (or house) that is fairly small and uncluttered. In our yard, we have a 15' walkway about two feet wide with a short fence on one side and a shed on the other. We put the crate at one end and guide a pig into the other end with the pig board. Once he starts down the path with the pig board blocking his view behind, there's nowhere to go but into the crate. We have also used exercise pens to corral the pig and then placed the crate at the pen opening and folded up the exercise pen making it smaller and smaller with the crate being the only place left to go.

I can remember when we first started working with pigs. Chasing them, yelling, wrestling them into crates, and it never worked. It stressed us, and it stressed the pig. Be sure you have enough help but also make sure that the helpers understand that this is not a roundup in the old west. We're not trying to scare the pig, just guide it. If you have a major size pig that won't fit in any crate, my wife's idea to a member that worked excellently was as follows. The evening before this pig had to go to U.C. Davis for some serious vet work, she had them fill the back of a covered pickup (a van would also work) with straw or hay. They then got some neighbors and friends to hold boards, and corrals on either side of the pig and move along as the pig was prodded towards a ramp (a sheet of 3/4" plywood with 2' x 4' reinforcing on the back) into the truck. The pig went into the truck, spent the night in the warm straw, and left the next morning for U.C. Davis without ever even waking up.

WHY BOTHER?

Why go to the vet for yearly exams?

General Exam: Just like us pigs need a general check of their heart and lungs, and general condition.

Vaccinations: With younger pigs it is probably a good idea to give them annual vaccinations. There are pig diseases out there that could kill or harm your animal and could be spread to other pigs. Older pigs (after 5 or 6 years) probably have their immunities built up. If you have a problem with mange or worms, you can give injectable Ivomec orally on a cracker every 3 months with probable success. It has worked in all cases I'm familiar with. Rabies vaccinations are another problem. There are no rabies vaccines approved for pigs, so many vets won't give them. Yet we have cases on record of pigs, who have bitten some-one, being confiscated by authorities and killed so that their brains can be checked for rabies. Some vets give a rabies vaccine, but I don't know if that would be recognized as sufficient by authorities.

Hoof Trimming: Very important. Pigs whose hooves are allowed to grow too long can develop serious leg problems. One of the pig's greatest problems is getting those spindly little legs to support that potbelly.

Long hooves shift the weight back and break down the hoof and ankle structure. If the pig is overweight, it will, of course, increase the severity of this problem. This is a situation that many pig owners take care of without the help of a vet. You can try sprinkling food on concrete surfaces daily to help your pig wear down his hooves. Beware if the pig is only used to soft surfaces this may be uncomfortable on the pig's legs and could possibly cause hoof cracking. Introduce this process slowly. You can also hold the pig as described earlier and trim the hooves yourself with a cutter, file or even an electric Dremel tool. This will be stressful to both you and the pig. You may be able to slowly train your pig to let you trim his hooves when he's laying down to get belly rubs or when he is eating. Just a little at a time and don't force it.

Tusk Trimming: Some people just let the tusks grow. (You can tell by the scars on their legs.) Problems this can cause are the obvious ones of inadvertent or advertent injury to you or others (including other pets) from these built in weapons. They also may get caught in fencing, furniture, garden equipment, etc. causing injury or damage. The other problem is that tusks can curve back into the mouth or cheek area puncturing the skin. Blunting the tip of a tusk is not much of a problem but may involve you having to restrain the pig. Trimming the tusk down to the gum line is more involved. It should be done with the earlier described OB cutting wire and if the pig is awake, care must be taken to keep the tusk from being drawn into the lungs of the screaming animal.

Eye and Ear Cleaning: These cleaning tasks can usually be accomplished when the pig is at rest. Use of liquid ear cleaners has created problems with temporary (up to a month) loss of hearing resulting in some cases.

Teeth Cleaning: Preventing decay is desirable, but probably not essential.

OTHER CONCERNS

Beware if you have multiple animals and one has been sedated. Keep the sedated animal away from the rest of the “herd” until it has fully recovered, plus an hour or so. Reintroducing a not fully recovered animal to the herd can cause a readjustment of the herd order (i.e. fighting). Always observe the herd after any animal is reintroduced and be prepared for possible serious altercations. We have seen cases of serious injuries after animals have been reintroduced.

We also are starting to see a problem with older pigs (five years or more) being given health checks. Extreme care must be taken if these pigs are sedated to keep the sedation as light as possible and for as little time as possible. Also restraining older pigs has led to stress-related deaths. Those of you who have been paying attention are now asking, “If I can’t restrain them and I can’t sedate them, how do I treat them?” No easy answer. We plan to try and keep the hooves down on our animals by feeding on concrete and hoof trimming when they allow it. We’re letting the tusks grow until they become a problem.

Vaccinations on our older pigs shouldn’t be needed unless rabies start being required. Eyes and ears can be handled on a stress-free basis. If tusk trimming or other needs make anesthetic the only choice, it will be Isoflurane at the lowest settings and for as short a time period as possible.

ISOFLURANE (Please read Dr. George’s explanation that follows.)

Pigs are very sensitive to anesthetics, and I have observed changes in the way Isoflurane gas is used over the past nine years that are significant. In the past, settings of 5% to put the pig to sleep and 2.5% to 3% to keep it there were rather commonly used, and I suspect still are. When the pig is first put under with the gas, the vaporizer should be set at no more than 3% and a full-face mask is used until the pig goes to sleep. During this procedure, the pig is usually on the floor in the lower half of his crate with the owner holding or restraining him. The pig is then placed on a table and the full-face mask is replaced by the proper sized “cat mask” (looks like a sink plunger with the edges rolled in) which fits over the snout allowing access to the mouth area. At this time the Isoflurane setting should be reduced to 2.5% and then 1.5% to 2%. In this final range, the pig may be slightly conscious. The goal is to try and keep the pig in the range right at the edge of being conscious. When procedures are over, the pig is returned to the crate. The Isoflurane is turned off, and Oxygen is administered as the pig wakes up. There may be some slight reaction as the pig becomes fully conscious, but nothing like what occurs when a pig comes up from injectable anesthetic.

Again, anesthetics are not good for or entirely safe for any living thing, but high levels of stress (terror) aren’t either. Until we reach the point of communication with these animals that they truly trust everything we do to them, some form of stress or anesthetic will be required for just simple procedures to keep them in good health.

I hope some of you find this information helpful or enlightening. This is a rather compressed version. It would take a small book to cover it in detail. If you need further information on some of the details or on where to get some of these supplies, please contact me. If you have any corrections or additional information, please let me know. If you would let us know some information about the veterinarian you use, we will pass it on to others or publish it in the newsletter for our members. We are constantly hearing from members who need a veterinarian in their area, but we seldom have much information to share. We’re still learning about these precious creatures. We’ve had very little time to find out how to share our lives with a potbellied pig. I only hope we are doing what is best for them. They certainly do a lot for us. You can contact me at: tspigglot@aol.com

The Veterinarian's View ~ by Dr. Lisle George

Dr. Lisle George of U.C. Davis Veterinarian Medical Teaching Hospital, one of the nation's top experts on potbellied pigs, was kind enough to read my article and respond to it with some suggestions. We as a club have been very fortunate to have Dr. George's professional support for both our personal animals and the hundreds of rescue animals that have passed through our foster pens. Without his support, this club would have been out of business as a rescue organization years ago, and without his dedication and knowledge, our potbellied pigs would not have the level and quality of medical care that he and his graduates have provided. Dr. George is presently in the process of finishing a much-needed veterinarian medical guide on potbellied pigs.

The article is excellent. Thanks for writing it, Chris. I only disagree on one point, and it is only based upon a judgement that I've made by anesthetizing a lot of pigs using different techniques. My personal preference is to use 1 mg/kg of Telazol as a preanesthetic unless the pig is very tractable and is harness-trained. In my opinion, the problems with Telazol stem from injection of the drug into the fat instead of the muscle. I insist that the pigs be given the drug with a 3.5-inch spinal needle inserted into the semimembranosus/semitendinosus muscles (hams). The needle must be inserted at least 2/3 of the length before the drug is injected. Standard 1.5-inch-long needles deposit the drug into the fat, and that leads to recovery problems.

I feel that a single injection of Telazol is preferable to making an excited pig breathe into a mask containing a stinky gas. I get fewer scars on my stomach too because I must hold the pigs while the gas is being delivered, and they are pretty good at filleting my hide with their back hooves. Gas administration takes 1 to 2 minutes, and I have had pigs stress-out during that time. Much better, in my opinion, to give a quick shot and wait for the pig to go to sleep, than to allow the pig to struggle while inhaling gas.

I agree wholeheartedly that obese or old pigs should not be anesthetized, if possible, although, in competent hands (our anesthesia service), we have had a 100% survival rate in obese, sick and elderly pigs using Telazol followed by intubation and Isoflurane delivery. For foot trims and other procedures where we don't want to anesthetize the pigs, we restrain them on our pig tilt table. The pigs are tilted onto their sides while being restrained in a squeeze chute. They can't move, and don't seem to struggle too much. I have restrained at least two dozen pigs that way, without mortality.

An Isoflurane setting of 5 on the vaporizer indicates that 5% of the inspired gases are Isoflurane. In my opinion, a vaporizer setting greater than 3% is too high, and represents an unnecessary risk factor. Pigs die from these high settings, and I have seen and been told of pigs that died of overdoses of Isoflurane. I would never put the machine up that high. That doesn't mean that all pigs die after inhaling gases containing 5% Isoflurane, but the risk of apnea and cardiac fibrillation is much greater than if the vaporizer is set at 3%.

About the Author:

James "Chris" Christensen and his wife, Marcie, purchased their first potbellied pig, T.S. Piggliot, in January of 1990. They became fast potbellied pig enthusiasts and were the first "pet" pig owners to join the California Potbellied Pig Association, CPPA, a club started by and for breeders. James and Marcie began working with CPPA to rescue and place potbellied pigs in loving homes. They presently have four rescued potbellied pigs (T.S. died 7/95), Riff, Chuckles, George and Standlee as well as a three-legged dog, Trepeuax.

VET TREATMENT PHOTOS



Cleaning Ears



Trimming Hooves



Trimming Hooves



Coming out of ISO Gas