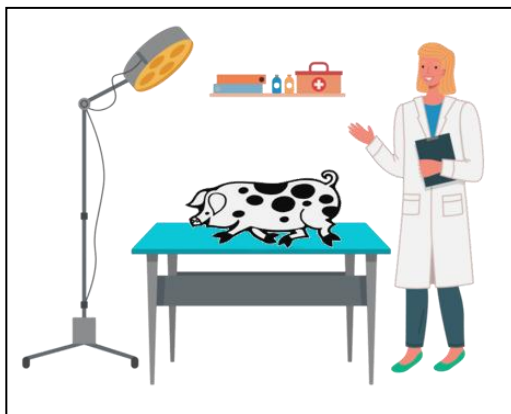


# Potbellied Pig Conditions and Treatments

by **Meredith R. Campbell, DVM**

Overall, our potbellied pigs seem to be a fairly healthy bunch, but accidents and illnesses occasionally do occur. The purpose of this article is to give first aid instruction and to teach you how to assess your pig's status.

Many pigs become agitated when they are examined by someone other than their owner. Therefore, if you learn to perform a basic physical examination on your pig, the data you obtain will help your veterinarian handle your case as well as decrease the stress to your pet. Stress from transport and examination cannot be overemphasized. Sometimes taking your pig to the clinic will be necessary, but many conditions can be successfully managed at home. This is not to imply that you do not need to contact your vet. You should always consult with your vet if you are concerned. S/he should know you and be familiar with your pet's normal condition.



## PERFORMING A PHYSICAL EXAM

Every pig owner should be able to determine the following information to relay to their veterinarian:

1. An accurate estimate of body weight.
2. Temperature taken rectally. Most pigs will permit this if you first scratch the region around their anus prior to inserting the lubricated thermometer. They usually even raise their tails to facilitate the procedure. Keep scratching until the thermometer beeps. Do not chase your pig around with the thermometer. Go slowly.
3. Mucous membrane color, temperature, and moisture content. The gum and inside of the lip are easiest places to check.
4. Attitude and responsiveness. Does the pig flick its ears or

tail when you speak to it? Is the pig interested in food? How does the animal move? Is the pig extremely irritable?

5. Pain threshold. Can you press on the abdomen, flex their extended legs, etc.?
6. Whether there are obvious lesions or skin discoloration.
7. Heart rate and respiration rate. Using a stethoscope will help you determine heart rate.
8. Stool characteristics. What is the consistency? Is there blood, mucous, or unusual material in the feces? Is the pig straining to defecate?
9. Characteristics of urine and urination. Is the pig straining to urinate? What is the frequency of urination? Are there any obvious crystals or blood in the urine? Does your barrow's prepuce have a new, unpleasant "boar like" odor?
10. Vomiting. How long following feeding? Description of vomited material.
11. Lameness. Note the duration and severity. Is there any possibility of trauma? (e.g. hit by car, kicked by horse, bit by dog, fallen off the bed, etc.)
12. Description of ocular (eye) or nasal (nose) discharge. Duration, consistency and color of discharge? Sneezing and/or coughing?

It is important that the first time that you perform a physical exam on your pig the pig is in a normal, healthy state. All data obtained from a sick pig must be compared to data obtained when the pig is healthy.



## FIRST AID KIT

I ask my clients to keep the following supplies on hand:

1. Digital beeping thermometer.
2. Syrup of Ipecac, 3 to 4 bottles. (I have read that syrup of Ipecac does not induce vomiting in pigs, but I have found it to be effective.)
3. Pedialyte or generic equivalent, 2 to 3 liters of fruit or bubble gum flavor.
4. Gatorade, fruit flavor.
5. Betadine solution.

6. Gauze sponges.
7. Oral dosing syringe.
8. Vet wrap.
9. White tape.
10. Telfa pads.

If the above items are available at home, you will save precious time and avoid having to leave your animal alone to obtain them when you have a problem.

## VOMITING

If your pig has ever thrown up, you know how unpleasant the experience can be. The material vomited has a repulsive odor. Fortunately, many vomiting pigs can be medically managed at home. First, examine the vomitus for carpet, plant material, plastic, dog food, etc. to get an idea what your pig might have gotten into. Many times nothing obvious is seen. Assess your pig's status as described above under physical exam procedures. The following instructions assume your pig is alert and responsive. If not, you should go to a veterinarian immediately.

Initially, your pig's stomach lining needs to rest and recover. S/he should not receive any food for 24 hours. You should offer small amounts (approximately 1/4 to 1/2 cup) of fluid (water or Pedialyte) every 3 to 4 hours. If s/he holds down fluid for 24 hours, you can begin to offer small amounts of bland food. I recommend boiled rice in small amounts (1 tablespoon at a time). Wait at least 4 hours before offering another tablespoon. If there is no vomiting after 24 hours, you may slowly mix in pig chow. Increase the amount over the next couple of days until your pig has returned to its original ration. If your pig cannot keep down water or vomits when food is reintroduced, you should have your pig examined immediately. X-Rays and blood work may be indicated.

## CONSTIPATION

Some pigs may not defecate for a few days and be completely normal. This is commonly seen when the weather becomes inclement. Many pigs that are holding out and are not used to riding in the car will defecate as soon as you drive them around the block. A stubborn healthy pig can be differentiated from a constipated pig by the fact that the pig is not straining and trying to defecate. Laxatives should be used to treat a fully constipated pig. In my experience, pigs are quite resistant to laxative treatment (it may take a lot and a while before you see results). I recommend mineral oil, Fibercon, and Metamucil. Dulcolax may also be used. Consult your veterinarian for proper dosages. Pigs that are not passing feces may have an intestinal obstruction. These pigs are usually off feed and have painful abdomens. They should be X-Rayed ASAP.

## CHOKING

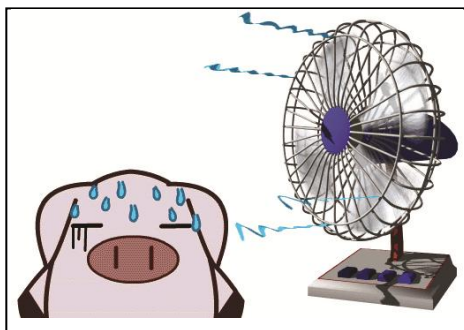
Reach into the pig's mouth and remove the obstructing object if at all possible. If not, perform the Heimlich maneuver. Be sure to cut all your pig's veggies and fruit into small pieces to decrease the possibility of choking or obstruction.

## DIARRHEA

Luckily, I have seen very few adult pigs with diarrhea. Scouring piglets should be examined immediately. Adults with diarrhea have usually eaten something they shouldn't have and respond well to treatment with Immodium A/D (human adult dosage). If the problem has not resolved with 2 to 3 doses (8 hours apart) or there is evidence of blood in the stool, see your vet.

## POISONING

Unfortunately potbellied pigs are PIGS. They commonly eat things they shouldn't. If you know your pet has ingested something potentially toxic, you should immediately call a poison hot-line. The University of Illinois has a 24-hour poison control service (1-800-548-2423) for \$30.00. There is also the [ASPCA Poison Control Center @ \(888\) 426-4435](https://www.aspcapoisson.com/). You may want to contact your local poison control center to see if they are able to help you with an animal poisoning incident. There is usually no charge for local services. If you know your pig has eaten something caustic within an hour or two, I recommend inducing vomiting. I have found syrup of Ipecac to be effective, but hydrogen peroxide mixed with milk has also been recommended. If ingestion of the toxic substance occurred longer than 2 to 4 hours ago, dilution and hydration with water and Pedialyte and/or laxative therapy may be indicated.

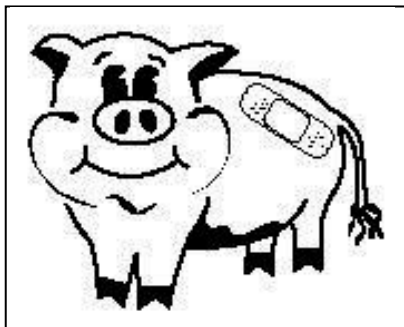


## OVERHEATING

Pigs are very prone to heat stroke. They only “sweat” through their snouts and have a poor cooling system. All pigs must have access to a shaded area and drinking water at all times. I also recommend a wading pool. An overheated pig is lethargic and may not eat. It is very important NOT to stress an overheated pig. NEVER spray a pig with cold water! It can kill the pig. Cooling from within by offering Gatorade/water mixture with ice cubes is the best treatment. If the pig is unwilling to drink, you can gradually decrease body temperature with wet towels applied first to the feet, and then to the ears and body. You can also aim a fan over a tray of ice and water to help cool your pet.

## PROBLEMS URINATING

You should watch for any difficulty your pig has urinating. If you notice your pig urinating a lot, s/he should be examined by a vet. The two most likely causes are urinary tract infection (UTI) and urinary obstructions. A urinary obstruction is a life-threatening condition that may require surgical intervention. We are seeing crystal and stone formation in some potbellied pigs. There may be a dietary and hereditary predisposition for this. Female anatomy makes females less likely to obstruct than males. An obstructed pig will not be able to pass any urine and the bladder will be full. The abdomen may appear distended. UTIs, in contract, cause animals to keep their bladders empty. They may only dribble a small amount each time they try, but some urine is passed. Fortunately, we see more UTIs than obstructions, but chronic UTIs cause stone formation. Frequently barrows will have a “boar-like” odor surrounding their prepuces and urine prior to other signs of illness. If this occurs, obtain a urine sample and see your vet. Giving cranberry juice and increasing water consumption may help ward off a more serious problem.



## LACERATIONS/BITES

Pig skin heals rapidly. This is desirable when a sterile surgical incision is made. However, when an injury occurs, the wound may close too soon causing an abscess. All wounds should be flushed with dilute Betadine solution (ice tea color). Hydrogen peroxide is acceptable for an initial cleaning, but will delay wound healing if used repeatedly. After cleaning, you may loosely wrap the area with gauze and vet wrap to keep it clean. Change bandage at least every other day unless otherwise instructed. Hot packing the area can assist healing if the wound has closed over. Some cases may require surgical drainage and antibiotic therapy. (See “Dippity Pig” below.)

## ANOREXIA

Potbellies eat like pigs. I consider a pig that is uninterested in food to be either totally full (which is hard to accomplish) or very ill. **A veterinarian should always be consulted as soon as your pig goes off feed.**

## LAMENESS

I am frequently consulted regarding lame pot-bellied pigs. Sprains and strains are the most common reasons for your pig to be limping. Blunt trauma can cause fractures, but this occurs less often. Palpating bones and manipulating joints can help you locate the afflicted area. You should also look for swelling. Rest and confinement are always indicated for limping pigs. Pigs that will bear no weight on the affected limb after an initial confinement period should be X-Rayed or receive additional medical therapy. Pigs whose hooves are over-grown may limp and if not trimmed, may have permanent chronic problems. Regardless of the cause of the lameness, overweight pigs will have a longer, more difficult recovery. Be careful of the cold weather. Pigs can get frostbite. My own pig had frost-bite on all four feet following five minutes outdoors in the snow at two degrees Fahrenheit. I recommend shoveling snow from the area your pig will use. (See “Dippity Pig” below.)

## DIPPITY PIG

“Dippity Pig” is a condition that is not well understood. It seems to occur only in potbellied pigs. The disease is characterized by lesions that “ooze” a serum-like fluid. These pigs are also weak in or unable to control their hind legs. The skin lesions may or may not precede the hind leg difficulty. While this condition appears very serious, it is also self-limiting. These pigs will usually recover within 24 to 72 hours. The only treatment required is to clean the skin lesion with Betadine solution and give supportive care (i.e. keep comfortable, eating, and drinking). Occasionally, these pigs may be treated with antibiotics or steroids, but this is usually not necessary.

I cannot stress strongly enough the importance of being able to perform a physical exam on your pet. The information you obtain can help your vet save your pig's life. Once again, do not wait until your pig is sick to learn how to do this. Practice while your pig is healthy. Preventative care is extremely important to ensure that your pig lives a long, healthy life. Keeping your pig in proper weight, providing a safe, pig-proofed environment, adequate nutrition, routine vaccination, and a loving home are the best ways to keep your potbellied pig healthy.

**About the Author:** Meredith R. Campbell, DVM has been treating potbellied pigs in the Westminster, CO area since the mid-1980's. She is a veterinarian who makes house calls, a very popular service with both the people and pig clients.

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