

# FROM THE VETERINARIAN'S PERSPECTIVE

(by multiple writers)

**By Bruce Lawhorn, DVM, MS Texas A & M University College Station, TX**

The following information is needed by the veterinarian when presented with an ill potbellied pig:

**Signalment:** Sex, intact/neutered, age, color, weight.

**History:**

- Diet, appetite, thirst, and availability of water.
- Elimination - regularity and consistency of stools and urine appearance
- Vomiting
- Changes in routine that may have been stressful (potbellies are creatures of habit)
- Housing (including any access to toxic plants)
- Vaccinations and worming (dates and names of products used)

The next step is a physical examination, and this has two parts:

1. Observing the pig at a distance when walking around and with as little stress as possible (unless the pig is recumbent or comatose).
2. The hands-on exam for rectal temperature, respiratory rate, and clinical appearance (gum color, injuries, hydration, etc. Note - eyes sunk far back in head means severe dehydration).

The difficulty with potbellied pigs is they are often totally unmanageable by any physical restraint and have to be tranquilized for the hands-on-exam. After sedation, physical exam is possible but parameters such as temperature and respiration are altered and may not be useful for helping make the diagnosis.

The advantage of tranquilization is that blood samples, fecal samples, and urine samples for various laboratory tests are easier to collect and these may be very helpful in arriving at a diagnosis. Bringing a sample of mid-stream urine in a clean or sterile container and a fecal sample in a sealed baggy (refrigerate if either sample is kept overnight) to the veterinarian is desirable and may allow initial testing and diagnostic information before the veterinarian collects samples.

The aforementioned diagnostic process is much easier for the owner, pig and veterinarian if the following tasks have been accomplished:

1. The potbellied pig is used to or even enjoys being transported (pigs may vomit from motion sickness which may have nothing to do with illness – best for pig to travel on empty stomach).
2. The pig has already been examined by a veterinarian and a good veterinary-client-patient relationship has been established so subsequent physical examination is more tolerable.
3. Pig records are in the custody of the client's veterinarian plus the owner has kept their own record of what has been done previously.
4. The pig has been trained (leash training in harness, etc.) and handled often (brushed, groomed, held) so handling by others is less stressful.

As a swine consultant to veterinarians who are seeing potbellied pigs and their clients, it is most time-efficient for all involved if every procedure outlined above has been accomplished and all pertinent information about signalment, history, presenting clinical signs, physical exam, results of laboratory tests and any response to preliminary treatment initiated is provided.

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***By Valarie V. Tynes, DVM University of California Davis, CA***

There are a variety of things that any pet owner can do in order to make their veterinarian's job a little easier. Remember, helping the veterinarian means helping you and your pet because that is what the vet's goal is, "to help you and your pet." Many veterinarians dislike seeing potbellied pigs because they view them as too difficult to handle. This problem could be avoided by early training and socialization of the pet pig. In this respect, my recommendations are the same as they would be for any pet. Can you blame an animal for being afraid to get in the car, if the only time they ever get in the car is to go to the vet?

All pets should be handled frequently, in a positive, non-threatening manner and rewarded for being calm. They should then be handled by a variety of people and exposed to a variety of novel places and situations. It should go without saying that your pig should be taught to wear a harness and walk on a leash. With patience, a pig of any age can learn this.

Pet owners should develop a relationship with a veterinarian as soon as they can after acquiring a new pet, especially if that pet is a novel one. When facing a life-threatening emergency, that is no time to find out that your regular veterinarian doesn't see potbellied pigs! In my experience, potbellied pigs that receive good, preventive health care rarely have emergency situations. By consulting with your veterinarian, you can be sure that your pig is receiving the vaccinations, etc. that are important for the area you are living in.

If you are fortunate enough to find a veterinarian who is eager and willing to see your potbellied pig but who admits he or she knows little, never fear! In spite of what many people say, there is an increasingly large amount of information available in veterinary texts and journals about potbellied pigs. There are at least three regularly published journals that I know of, that cover nothing but exotic animal care. These are good sources for potbellied pig information. Most major veterinary conferences continue to offer some potbellied pig seminars. Send your veterinarian to the NAPPA web site for more information. Soon a list of these books and journals will be added to the website!

When acquiring a new pet be sure to find out EXACTLY what vaccinations it has had and WHEN. You should also find out about any treatments for parasites that have been given and when they were given. When you go to your veterinarian for the first time, bring that information with you. Any time you change veterinarians, get copies of your records to take to the next veterinarian. Good record-keeping ensures that no part of your pig's health care is overlooked and that your money is not wasted by repeating tests, treatments or vaccinations unnecessarily.

Last but not least, BE OBSERVANT! An important part of making a diagnosis is getting a good history. The veterinarian needs to know what your pig eats, when it ate last, when it last eliminated, and if it is vomiting or having abnormal stools. All pet owners should be able to answer these questions. It really can mean the difference between life and death!

Obesity and the health problems that occur secondary to it are the most common things I see threatening the health of potbellied pigs of all ages. Obesity contributes to strain on bones and joints that are often already weak due to poor confirmation. It also puts strain on the already small heart and lung capacity of the potbellied pig. Obesity seems to lead to a very poor quality of life where the pig is caught in a vicious cycle - it doesn't want to get up and move around because it is so uncomfortable and the less it exercises, the more overweight and unhealthier it becomes. The pig leading this sedentary lifestyle does not spend its time foraging and interacting with others as it probably would in the wild, possibly leading to some of the behavior problems we see in pet pigs.

Pet owners should concentrate on preventing obesity in their pets. Once a potbellied pig is overweight, weight loss is extremely difficult and will require a great deal of effort and commitment on the owner's part.

Another problem frequently encountered in veterinary practice can occur with any pet, and that is simple ignorance on the part of the owner. Too many people acquire pets, especially novel or exotic pets without first finding out what that animal's husbandry and nutritional needs are. The majority of the time, this results in an unhappy pet owner and a weak or non-existent bond with their pet. Pets belonging to these owners are the ones I see most often that are ill or neglected and that the owner is seeking to re-home. You can avoid these problems by doing your homework BEFORE purchasing a new pet, not afterwards!

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What can potbellied pig owners do to make their vet's job easier when it comes to treating their pets?

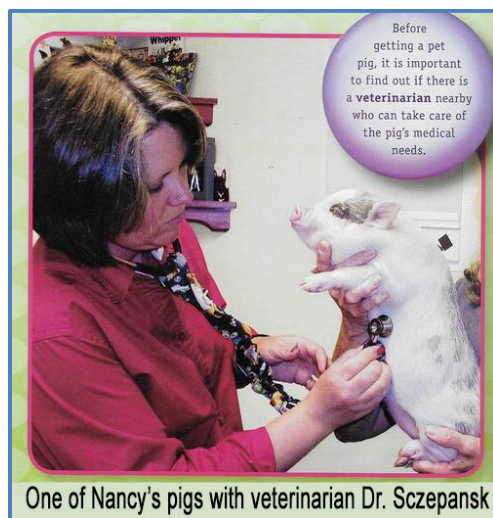
**1. Be observant:** While Jenny's point that owners may misinterpret their pig's problem is occasionally true, we veterinarians also depend greatly on an owner's description of a problem to get us headed in the right direction. You might think of the veterinarian's examination of a pig as a detailed "snapshot" of the pig's condition at a single point in time. The owner's observations are more like a "movie" taken over a longer period of time. Both perspectives are important to get a complete picture of a pig's condition. Try to be as objective as possible when responding to the vet. Saying "My pig normally eats two cups of feed so many times each day, however, for the past two days, she has only eaten half a cup" conveys more useful information than "I'm worried that my pig is not eating as much as she should." Pay attention to your pig's normal eating, drinking, elimination, and play habits so that you can detect a departure from normal.

**2. Be prompt:** Fortunately, most departures from normal are minor and self-correcting. Animals have been designed with a great capacity for responding, adapting, and healing themselves when problems arise. However, when a problem arises that needs medical intervention, earlier is almost always better than later. A good example would be a case of pneumonia which usually responds well and completely to antibiotic treatment early in the disease but may respond poorly and result in permanent lung damage if treatment is delayed. As a veterinarian, I would rather be "bothered" by a minor problem that does not need treatment than to be presented with an animal that I cannot help because it is too late. Granted, your vet is probably busy and has more animals to care for than just yours, but open communication with your vet should help you develop a sense of when to call for help.

**3. Be confident:** I especially appreciate Jenny's suggestion that you develop a working relationship with a vet before a crisis arises. You may need to "shop around" and find the vet that is interested and knowledgeable, and (most importantly) that you can relate to in a positive way. A medical crisis is stressful to both pig and owner and it is helpful for both owner and vet to have a relationship built on trust and confidence. Veterinarians are human and as such are imperfect, but, almost without exception, we desire the best for an owner and his/her animals. If we sense that an owner does not believe that of us, it makes our job much more stressful and difficult. While we vets cannot guarantee that all medical problems will have the desired outcome, it is much more satisfying when we all know that we have partnered together to do the best we can for the pigs.

Preventive measures that owners can take to keep their pigs healthy are:

1. Proper feeding. Avoid obesity.
2. Good, clean environment. Free access to food and water. Protection from extremes of heat and cold.
3. Routine health care procedures such as internal and external parasite control and vaccinations.



## **QUESTIONS TO ASK VETS WHEN LOOKING FOR A VET FOR YOUR POTBELLED PIG**

**We strongly recommend you take your pig to someone who treats potbellied pigs regularly.**

1. What is the Vet's experience with potbellied pigs? How many potbellied pig owners has the Vet had as clients?
2. Does the Vet make house calls? If "yes," what is the Vet's house call fee?
3. If the answer to #2 is "yes," how far is the Vet willing to travel from his/her base?
4. Is the Vet familiar with trimming hooves and tusks of potbellied pigs? Have the Vet explain his/her procedure.
5. If above is "yes," what is the Vet's charge for trimming hooves and tusks of potbellied pigs?
6. Does the Vet perform surgery, including spaying and neutering of potbellied pigs? Have the Vet explain his/her procedure.
7. Is the Vet familiar with the necessary yearly vaccinations needed of potbellied pigs? Ask the Vet the names of the vaccinations.
8. It is customary for the client to go into exam room with the vet for regular vaccinations, check-ups, health concerns, etc. If vet is going to perform a surgical procedure, and you have discussed anesthesia method and approved, then you will leave the pig in veterinarians care and be called upon completion of surgery as to results and when you can pick up our pig. This is the time that you also can ask specific questions.
9. Does the Vet listen when you have questions or offer advice or information? If the answer to this question is No, FIND ANOTHER VET!
10. What would the Vet do, in the event the animal bit him? What would be his/her reaction, i.e., want to destroy the animal to test for rabies? Notify authorities? What would be his/her reaction?
11. Does the Vet have plans to move out of the area or retire anytime soon? Does the Vet have a back-up vet who can specialize in the treatment of potbellied pigs in case of his/her absence, such as moving out of the area, retirement, illness, or vacations?
12. Can the Vet disclose reference information of potbellied pig owners he/she has had as clients. Ask if you can contact them.

### **Helpful tips when your pig needs a vet:**

A well-trained and prepared pig will be much more likely to cooperate with any procedures that your vet deems necessary. The training time prior to the visit to the vet is time well spent so that your pet will experience as little stress and pain possible.

### **Pre Office Visit Training:**

- ♥ Make certain your pig can be lifted and held easily.
- ♥ Train your pet pig to go into a kennel, so the ride in the car will be a safe one.
- ♥ Touch your pig all over - inside his/her ears, his/her hooves, under his/her tail and stomach - because your vet will be doing this during a physical examination.
- ♥ Make sure your pig is used to being rubbed or scratched vigorously on the neck and behind the ears since this is an action the vet might do while giving an injection.

### **At The Vet Office:**

- ♥ Interview your prospective vet to determine his/her experience with the potbellied pig and his/her interest in learning more about your pig's care.
- ♥ Obtain references of past vet's clients, if possible, and talk to them about their experience with the prospective vet.
- ♥ Visit your prospective vet with your pet pig prior to any emergency situation and have your prospective vet do a "well" checkup for your pig.
- ♥ Evaluate your prospective vet as to the manner in which he/she relates to and handles your pet pig.
- ♥ Take treats and have your vet offer a few as a friendly introduction.
- ♥ Take a rubber mat or rug for your pig to stand on, thus providing better footing on the slick cold exam table or floor.
- ♥ Follow your vet's instruction should the stress to you or your pig become too great during exam.
- ♥ Do not allow anyone to lift your pig up by his/her stomach or by his/her legs.

### **Should Your Pig Need To Stay Overnight:**

- ♥ Travel with extra bedding and a plastic bag should your pig have an accident in the car.
- ♥ Take your pig's familiar bedding for your pig to have while staying at the vet office overnight.
- ♥ Check the temperature of the location in which he/she will be housed - make sure you or the vet can provide a heat lamp or a fan if necessary.
- ♥ Reward your pig with a very special treat after the visit to his/her vet.