

BRUCELLOSIS – The eye opener

By: Lana Hollenback

Edited by: Carol Eiswald and Dr. John Carr

When you think things can't get much worse, they often do. Many pet pig owners from around the U.S. have little or no idea about swine diseases, so it's time to start the learning process. I'm reminded that it was just a few years ago, maybe a little longer, that a prominent pet pig owner was traveling to see a vet with a sick pig and decided to stop on the way and see a couple of old friends who also had pigs. It ended up being a costly stop as the pet pig was sick and had a contagious illness, so both the old friends (who ran small sanctuaries) had to disinfect not only their stalls but also the grounds on which their pigs lived. It could have cost the lives of many of the pigs, and it did cost a lot to clean it up.

Some diseases are airborne, some endemic (regularly occurring) and some require direct contact with the sick pig to spread. It's important to know and understand the dynamics of some of the swine diseases that are out there. We are starting this off with one that is causing serious problems within pig herds in a handful of states right now. The causative organism is the bacteria *Brucella suis*, which causes the disease *brucellosis*. In humans, it's known as *brucellosis* or *undulant fever*. There are several variants of *Brucella*, but we will deal primarily with *B. suis*.

An infected pig seldom shows any signs of having the bacteria. A sow can carry the inflammation in the wall of her uterus and/or not be able to produce babies, or she can abort once she is pregnant. In boars, the disease can cause infertility and *orchitis* (inflammation of the testicles). It can also cause severe lameness in the posterior area, which resembles arthritis.



Picture of infected testicles in a boar.

The most common way of a pig acquiring brucellosis is through contact with another pig that has it. It's very important that when you take in a new pig that you quarantine for an extended time (more on this later).

One less common method of exposure that we often don't consider is that this is a disease of certain wildlife also, and even dogs can be carriers and transmit it to your pigs. Those sweet little animals that scurry around in pastures at night looking for food can bring it to your pigs; but again, the most common way by far is pig to pig transmission.

Because it's so highly contagious, euthanasia is recommended if the disease has spread, although sometimes permanent quarantine is an option. We don't like to consider this. So if you have a rescue or sanctuary or are just an owner of a pet pig or two and you are bringing in more, think

biosecurity (quarantine pens and good hygiene). A quarantine pen should be a minimum of 30 feet away from your other pigs, however each state's requirements are different. This is the main way it can be controlled, but it doesn't stop there.

Brucellosis is considered to be a zoonotic disease; therefore it can be passed to humans. Most of us don't even think of this or even know that it can happen. In humans it's called *undulant fever*. Just within this year some states have been battling outbreaks of brucellosis in swine, humans and other mammals. There are confirmed cases in New York, Pennsylvania and a currently possible case in Florida, plus more in other states, both human and animal. In New York it has been confirmed in three different counties; in more than one it included humans and other animals. Check it out at (<http://farmprogress.com/story-swine-brucellosis-rears-ugly-head-pastured-ny-porkers-9-145676>) Several dogs on two different farms had to also be euthanized due to brucellosis. Both owners had acquired it also and are being treated. This is one of the occupational hazards of having pigs, and a great reason to consider biosecurity on your property and that of others for the wellbeing of pigs both coming and going. Some sanctuary owners don't adopt out, but taking them in without proper blood testing and utilizing quarantine pens is far more important. Anyone can acquire undulant fever if not careful. If you have a pig that tests positive for brucellosis, you should also be tested for it.

We rescue people are seeing more and more breeders who are breeding and selling babies without any kind of testing. This must stop. These practices are endangering other pet pigs. Let's look beyond the breeders to the buyers. It's a buyer beware situation. Never buy a piglet from a breeder unless they show you and/or give you a copy of the blood work on their pigs. If you don't do so, you are just as guilty of putting other pigs in danger. This is why it is so IMPORTANT not to transport any pig across a state line that has not been blood tested if required by the incoming state to which it's going. I hear from so many who say that they just put them in their cars and go with them. You are endangering not only your pet pig, farm pigs, and also yourself.

Although we sometimes don't like government interference, the USDA can be your and your pig's best friend when it comes to these things. Remember that as much as we love the feral pigs, they are big time carriers of this horrid disease. If you love them, then test them. Keep our babies safe. No one wants to euthanize any pig(s) but when it can mean the life of others it is something we all have to do and be held accountable for. Read up on your state web pages and learn as much as you can to keep your pet pig, farm pig, feral pig and yourself safe and healthy.