

Docking the tail or not: Effect on tail damage, skin lesions and growth performance in growing-finishing pigs

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Key Points:

- Many swine producers have been looking for an alternative to tail docking since it is a painful procedure for pigs
- A study examining welfare and performance of pigs with docked and undocked tails was performed
- Performance was unaffected by tail docking, and it reduced incidence of tail damage

Tail docking is a common preventative method for tail biting in pigs. Since tail docking is a painful procedure for pigs, swine producers are looking for alternatives to tail docking.

A study was conducted to evaluate the effect of tail docking on welfare and performance of growing-finishing pigs. Pigs (n = 240; 25.7 ± 2.9 kg), including 120 pigs that were tail-docked at birth and 120 pigs that remained with intact tails were used. Pigs were housed in 8 pens of 30 pigs in a confinement barn for 16 weeks, with 4 pens each housing pigs of both sexes with docked or intact tails.

Results indicate that tail docking did not affect daily gain, feed intake, gain to feed ratio (all P > 0.10, Table 1). During the study period, 5% of docked pigs were removed from their home pen due to tail damage, compared to 21% of intact pigs were removed for reasons associated with tail biting or tail damage. Consequently, 97% of docked pigs and 90% of intact pigs were sold for full value.

This study suggests that tail docking did not affect growth performance of pigs or eliminate occurrence of tail biting, but it reduced the incidence of tail damage in pigs housed in a confinement system.

Table 1. Growth performance and skin lesions of pigs with docked tails or intact tails

	Tail docking		SE	P - value
	Docked	Intact		
Number of pigs for the study	120	120		
Body weight, kg				
Initial	25.2	24.6	0.27	0.10
End	126	126	1.1	0.98
Average Daily Gain, kg	0.855	0.856	0.008	0.95
Average Daily Feed Intake, kg	2.14	2.14	0.033	0.88
Gain:Feed	0.399	0.401	0.004	0.79
Number of pigs removed to hospital pens:				
Total	8 ² (7%) ³	28 (23%)		0.001
For tail biting or tail damage	6 (5%)	25 (21%)		
Pigs harvested:				
Harvested without trim loss	116 (97%)	108 (90%)		0.14
Harvested with trim loss	2 (1.7%)	3 (2.5%)		
Not harvested ⁴	0	3 (2.5%)		
Died or euthanized	2 (1.7%)	6 (5%)		

¹Tail docking (1.3 to 2.5 cm from the base of the tail) occurred within 24 h after farrowing.
²Number of pigs.
³Percentage of the total number of pigs that were allocated to each treatment group.
⁴One pig was harvested but the carcass was condemned, one pig was mistakenly identified as a boar, and one pig was not sent to harvest due to its extremely light body weight at conclusion of the experiment.

Find the complete paper at <https://www.pork.org/research/tail-biting-in-growing-finishing-pigs/>

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