**Alternative possibilities for weaning piglets**

Dr.med.vet. Nicole Herout

Weaning piglets from **sows (oder besser pigs?)** at the age of 4-5 weeks is one of the most difficult periods in pig production.

Piglet health depends essentially on a problem-free birth process, good colostrum supply and sufficient milk from the mother animal. All three factors are by no means self-evident, as problems such as delayed birth, **MMA**, increased germ pressure or excessive piglet numbers are very common.

In order to avoid losses in the first days of life, many piglets are supplied with antibiotics on the first day of life. However, this first treatment also causes a disturbance in the development of the intestinal flora of these newborn animals. Since early diarrhoea, usually caused by E. coli, still often occurs as a result, further treatment often has to follow soon.

Since such pre-treated piglets are more susceptible, many pig farmers are forced to add antibiotics to the feed during the weaning phase, not only zinc substitutes but also antibiotics. This is a fixed routine in many farms, independent of any additional individual therapies required for particular problem groups.

Unfortunately, in reality this often means that piglets have already undergone 3-6 antibiotic treatments by the time they **reach the fattener** (im Artikel deutsch: Mäster) at 30 kg live weight.

Possible solutions are on the one hand the stabilisation of **sow health**, which has to be discussed at another time, and on the other hand the strengthening of the intestinal flora of the piglets so that they can cope better with various feed changes.

This can be achieved by the preventive use of highly concentrated herbal mixtures. It has also been shown that the use of higher concentrations of bentonite in **weaning feed** has a further positive effect.

How to proceed?

Early diarrhoea: if this occurs in the first week of life, a herbal mixture can be injected into the affected piglets' mouths, which has calming, gas reducing and stuffing effects on the digestive system. Since piglets do not eat independently at this age, these herbs must be mixed with water and injected into the mouth. The advantage is that besides a quick stabilization, the destruction of the intestinal environment can be avoided.

**Feeding: (Anfütterung)** If small amounts of herbs and bentonite are gradually mixed into the premix feed offered, the taste tolerance is trained on the one hand and toxins and faulty fermentation products are bound on the other hand and the vitality of the piglets gets strengthened.

Weaning feed: piglets prepared in this way can then be weaned without any additional giving of antibiotics. The amount of zinc substitute can also be significantly reduced. Instead, the mixing in of 2 kg/600kg of a highly concentrated intestinal regulating herbal mixture and 2-3 kg/600kg of a very high-quality bentonite, such as clinoptilolite, zeolite or montmorrilonite, has proven to be a complete substitute. The advantage of this procedure lies not only in the stabilisation of the intestines but also in the avoidance of growth depression in the first week after weaning. The piglets continue to grow better, often reaching their respective weight a few days earlier and the fatteners notice a more resilient health of the animals.

As an example, here the operating data of a piglet producer from Lower Austria with approximately 250 sows:

**In 2016** approximately 4800 piglets were marketed. Breeding capacity approximately 80 days to 30kg.

Antibiotics consumption:

A total of 46 kg of three different antibiotics against early diarrhoea, weaning diarrhoea and prophylaxis during weaning were used for all 17 groups.

In addition, 102 kg of zinc substitutes were used.

Total costs of antibiotics and zinc per group of 280 animals per year: approximately 210,00 €.

**In 2017**: 4900 piglets marketed. Breeding capacity approximately 80 days to 30kg.

A total of 45 kg of the three different antibiotics and 102 kg of zinc replacement were used for all 17 groups.

Total costs of antibiotics and zinc replacement per group of 290 animals per year: approximately 250,00 €.

Procedure **2018**:

By the end of september 2018 3800 piglets had been sold, the rearing performance was slightly improved and was then around 77 days to 30kg.

The vitality and intestinal health supporting herbs were successfully used for occasional piglet early diarrhoea.

During the 3rd week of rearing, a herbal mixture was used approximately 7 days before weaning and during the first 6 weaning days, which prevents the usual diarrhoea by its intestinal regulating composition. For this purpose 2-3 kg of clinoptinolite were mixed in. Furthermore the zinc replacement could be reduced in the first two breeding weeks by half.

Consumption: 6 kg herbs, 3 kg zinc substitute, 8 kg clinoptinolite / group a of 280-300 piglets.

No antibiotics were used for piglet diarrhea in 2018, neither for the treatment of early diarrhea nor in prophylaxis or therapy during weaning.

The financial expense per group of weaned piglets for herbs and clinoptinolite was approximately €90.00.

In all three annual calculations, only the respective cost of materials was calculated exclusively for diarrhoea.

Finally, I have to state that the piglet rearing with the herb application works very well and also the feedback of the fatteners is very positive.

**Summary:**

The figures of the example company clearly show that a reduction of antibiotics can be achieved by systematic preventive management measures. This has a positive effect not only on the fitness and vitality of the piglets but also on the farmer's wallet.