

### A critical case?

**Q** One of my Oxford sows farrowed two days ago and is now very lethargic; she won't get up to eat or drink. I am worried about her and want to know what I should do?

Rachel, Hereford

**A** I needed to know more about this case before I could offer an opinion, and a telephone call to Rachel revealed that all seven piglets in the two-day-old litter were apparently looking unwell, and just pushing vainly at their mother's udder. The situation needed urgent attention and so I visited the sow and litter straight away.

An initial appraisal confirmed that the sow was critically ill. A conspicuous feature was the discoloration of the lips, the eye linings and the vulva lining. There was a marked change from the normal salmon pink, to a purple colour; something which must always be regarded as a serious sign. The inference is that the blood circulation is not functioning at all efficiently. The purple colour means there is little oxygen being carried to

the vital parts.

In a healthy animal, oxygen combines with the haemoglobin in the red blood cells, and produces an obviously pink colour. We're all aware of how important a good supply of oxygen is to maintain life and vitality. It was quite clear that this sow was in circulatory collapse, but what was the cause and was it likely to affect other, adjacent sows?

Close examination of the udder revealed the problem. By careful feeling of every mammary gland (something that needs to be carried out if a sow is unwell soon after farrowing), three glands were clearly abnormal; an abnormal milk-coloured discharge could be expressed from those teats (see photograph). The glands were abnormally hard, the surface skin was tense and almost shiny due to the swelling and fluid accumulation.

I diagnosed acute mastitis which had produced a toxæmia. Toxins produced by bacteria in the udder had entered the blood circulation and were damaging all organs. The development of this type of

mastitis can be extremely rapid so, for treatment to have any chance of success, the condition must be caught early. Of course, if the sow dies or has to be humanely euthanased, rearing the piglets is the next issue! No wonder the piglets were suckling in vain, there was little milk available.

Toxic mastitis of this sort is relatively uncommon, but a milder version is frequently diagnosed in sows within a few days after farrowing, and can be treated successfully. The udder is full of milk at this stage, and bacteria in the birth pen can gain access to the glands through the teat orifices, or via cuts in the nipple. Such cuts can be produced by the piglets' sharp teeth.

To minimise the risk, high levels of cleanliness must be maintained. All dung and afterbirth etc must be removed as soon as possible, and the pen bedding should be kept dry. A particularly damaging bacterium can exist in large numbers in certain batches of mud-contaminated sawdust or wood shavings. If the infection is in the bedding then more than one sow can be affected. But, generally, this condition tends to affect individuals.



Abnormally hard, tense and almost shiny skin an indicator of acute mastitis.