Associations between Antibacterial Treatment and the Prevalence of Tail-Biting-Related Sequelae in Danish Finishers at Slaughter

Secondary infections as a result of tail biting cause substantial economic losses in pig production and are a subject of concern for animal welfare. The use of first-choice antibacterial agents in the treatment of tail biting in finishing pigs is hypothesized to be negatively correlated with the development of systemic infection. This would be expected to reduce the prevalence of post-mortem pyemic sequelae (such as osteomyelitis and abscesses) in finishers with tail-bite lesions. We performed a register-based study that included three Danish databases, holding information on the purchase of antibacterials at herd level (VetStat), herd demographics (Central Husbandry Register), and relevant observations at slaughter (meat inspection data). We included all finishers from indoor production finisher herds that met the inclusion criterion of at least one slaughtered finisher with a recorded tail-bite observation during 2015 at the single largest Danish abattoir. The final dataset held 1,070 herds with one or more tail-bite observations, from which 14,411 of 2,906,626 finishers (0.50%) had an individual record of a tail bite. Within this group of finishers with tail-bite observations, the recorded tail-biting-related sequelae included osteomyelitis (8.1%), abscesses in the hindquarters (10.5%), abscesses in the forequarters (2.3%), abscesses in the mid-section of the carcass (2.9%), abscesses in the limbs (2.4%), and chronic arthritis (0.5%). Due to a high-herd prevalence (>25%), osteomyelitis and hindquarter abscesses were selected for further analysis. The occurrence of osteomyelitis and hindquarter abscesses in individual finishers with tail-bite observations was described using a generalized linear mixed effects model with binomial response and logit link. Herd was included as a random effect, while herd size and various antibacterial treatments were tested for inclusion in the model as fixed effects. The final models indicated a significant association between herd size and both osteomyelitis (p = 0.014) and hindquarter abscesses (p < 0.001), with larger herds (2,001–12,000 registered finisher pigs) showing a reduced risk. Further, a negative association was found between the occurrence of hindquarter abscesses and the use of oral pleuromutilin (p = 0.022). The significant association with herd size highlights the potential importance of management factors in reducing the occurrence of tail-bite lesions in finishing pigs.

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