

Cycling, Breeding, Pregnancy & Farrowing

The gestation period of a gilt or sow averages 114 days, or 3 months, 3 weeks, 3 days. Variation can be one to two days either side. This could be attributed to the length of estrus or cycling and when fertilization takes place. Estrus, cycling, or standing heat can be anywhere from 24 hours up to 40 or slightly longer, but averaging around 36 hours. Each gilt or sow can be different and they can be different for each of their standing heat cycles. Ovulation normally occurs on the second day. You may notice the beginning of standing heat 1 to 2 days prior and possibly up to 3 days. Gilts in particular may exhibit a swollen vulva, some more noticeable than others. This is more difficult to detect in sows. You may also notice a slight discharge. She may appear more restless and vocal, have a poor appetite, and flick her tail or prick her ears. When pressure is applied using the palms of both hands on her rear or flank area and she stands still, she is in standing heat and receptive for breeding.

Mark your calendar. Gilts and sows normally cycle every 18 to 21 days. If she does not cycle again after 18 to 21 days, she is likely bred. You should count up 114 days from her breeding. Sometimes a gilt or sow will produce hormones during this time that will peak the boars' interest; however she will not stand for breeding.

A good indicator for your boar is frothing of the mouth similar to toothpaste, gnashing of teeth, and becoming more vocal. You may also detect a peculiar scent with your boar. This is a time to be more cautious around your boar. No matter how friendly he usually is, when he has breeding on his mind that's all he's thinking about. To avoid possible injuries to your boars it may be wise to keep breeding age boars separate. (see note 1)

Matching your gilt, sow and boar size and weight can also be important. Pairing a smaller, younger boar with an older, larger sow can be intimidating to the boar. Although eager, he may become hesitant and make several false starts. Actual breeding and fertilization may not take place for 2-3 cycles as he becomes more confident. Pairing a larger boar with a smaller gilt or sow can cause injury to the gilt or sow and possibly the boar, or be a cause for inability to conceive. If possible the breeder should properly match their breeding pairs. If there are problems then readjust, eliminate them, and try again. (see note 2)

If you don't witness the breeding yourself a good indicator may be "boar blight". You may notice a rubbed or balding area on your gilt or sows back toward the rear. This is a good indicator she has been mounted for breeding. It doesn't always happen but is something to watch for. You may also notice a discharge from your gilt or sow.

If there is a problem with the pregnancy or with piglets after conception and up to around 30 days, the sow could reabsorb the fetus(s). After around 30+ days the piglets bones begin to develop and calcify. If the problem develops after around 30 days the piglet(s) can't be fully absorbed and she will deliver mummified piglets. (see note 3)

Gilts usually begin "showing" around 2 to 2 ½ months of pregnancy. The early pregnancy is more difficult to determine visually than with sows. Look for a small pooch developing along the sides directly in front of the rear flanks. With sows you will see more weight gaining in the belly area. It's more reliable to verify with the cycling dates 18 to 21 days after breeding. There are ultra sounds, dopplers and sonograms available to determine if your gilt or sow is pregnant however they can be expensive and some are still unreliable. There are also hormone tests available that your vet can perform. For now there are no other proven tests that will verify pregnancy. Human pregnancy tests do not work on swine. (see note 4)

"D" day. Delivery day. She will be more nervous, pacing or circling. She may gnash her teeth sometimes, prick her ears up and flick her tail. You may notice a discharge. She may not eat as much for a day or two prior. A sure indicator is nest building. Provide her with material such as straw, leaves and twigs. In warmer weather she may root out a small area in the ground or she may have selected an area she considers safe and that's where she'll go. In woods and pastures she will usually seek out shelter under trees or bushes or in gullies, ravines, or depressed areas. Usually with nest building, delivery is within 24 hours. She will probably lay down 1 to 2 hours before deliveries start to take place. You'll notice her breathing change and she'll look almost trance-like. As a birth nears you may see her body stiffen and her upper rear leg raise and pull forward. She will do this several times as the piglet progresses thru the birth canal. The piglets arrive on their own time. Some may quickly follow

others, and there may be as much as 45 minutes or longer before another one arrives. Some may come head first, some butt first. If you are watching the process, allow your sow space and quiet. She is working hard and concentrating on important business and normally doesn't require any assistance or encouragement. Hogs have 2 horns, placentas, in which the piglets grow. The placentas can be expelled as much as 4 hours after the last birth, or portions may also be delivered during farrowing and not be noticed as placentas.

Your sow will take care of the clean-up. Remember that whatever she does, it's for the protection of her litter. Centuries of built in instinct is telling her to remove anything that may attract predators. This may be the placentas and it may also be stillborn piglets. (see note 5)

Have food and water available nearby for your sow. Once farrowing is completed, she is rested and the piglets have nursed, she may be hungry and thirsty. It's also normal for some sows not to eat or drink for as much as a day after farrowing. Each one is different so let her make the choice by having it available.

*****Notes*****

(note 1) Red Wattle boars may not exhibit any of these typical characteristics. Some RW boars are more laid back than others, or he may be laid back with this breeding but more aggressive with the next. The aggressive or pushy behavior is instinct at breeding time and not an indicator that the boar is naturally or normally aggressive. Boars can detect cycling gilts or sows for long distances. Check for this before assuming you have an aggressive boar. Your boar may act differently, even go off feed or be lethargic especially if they're separated and unable to breed. Breeding age boars housed together may become aggressive toward each other. Breeding in hogs is a natural instinct that is based on survival.

(note 2) The rear end of the gilt or sow supports most of the boars' weight. Her smaller structure and legs may not support him causing her injury which could be crippling and permanent. With a larger boar the penis may also bypass the reproductive organs and ejaculation takes place near the bladder which will not produce fertilization. This can be due to the height or longer legs of the boar mounting the smaller gilt or sow causing them to be out of natural physical balance. Inability to become pregnant or "in pig", may not be the gilt, sow or boars' fault. In these cases, size does matter.

(note 3) Keep this in mind if you know your gilt or sow was bred but came back into heat or cycling a few weeks later. This is nature's way of assuring survival and may not be an indication that the sow or boar is infertile or has breeding problems. Keeping notes in your calendar will help you monitor each hog over time.

(note 4) Some people use the method of observing the vulva and clitoral hood. "The pointy thing" on your gilt or sows vulva. The saying goes if it's pointed up early in the pregnancy then she's bred. This would be due to the additional weight pulling on her reproductive and internal organs. This may work sometimes but it's not fail safe and it's more reliable in gilts rather than sows. Your gilt or sow may not be bred but has eaten a large meal or is simply gaining weight and that weight is pulling on the organs.

(note 5) Make sure your gilt or sow has a secure place to be. She can be in pasture, woods, smaller area with some type of shelter, or a barn for examples. If she's out in open pasture or woods, be aware of predators and make the area as secure as possible. Some breeders will bring their gilts or sows closer to a barn, house, or smaller secured area a few days prior to farrowing to monitor the progress easier, and to better control the possibility of predators. Being closer also makes it easier when it's time to start the piglets on feed or if additional heat sources are needed in frigid temperatures.

All information given is based on averages and generalization. It is not meant to be all encompassing. You will discover there are many opinions, some tried and true and some you should forget. No two gilts or sows will be exactly the same, and they may not exhibit the same indicators each time they're cycling or farrowing. As a breeder, you should get to know the personalities and looks of your hogs. This will enable you to know if it's breeding time, farrowing time, or if there are problems that need to be addressed. With practice you will become comfortable and be able to pick up on slight changes. You should also have a calendar with large blocks and dedicated only to your hogs to write in so you can keep track of everything. Knowing your hogs, knowing what to look for, and keeping good records will help you develop experience and confidence.