

FEEDS & FEEDING

A TECHNICAL PUBLICATION OF THE ANIMAL NUTRITION ACADEMY

Volume 2 – Issue 3

Teaching piglets to eat with mats after weaning

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This issue examines why low feed intake after weaning remains a major nursery challenge and argues that mat feeding should be understood as feed training, not floor feeding.

Newly weaned piglets are asked to do several difficult things at once. They must leave the sow, adapt to a new environment, establish social order, find water, recognize dry feed, and learn how to use a feeder and a drinker.

The nursery diet may be excellent, but it has no value until the piglet consumes it. This is why early feed intake remains one of the most important practical targets in nursery nutrition. Low intake after weaning is not a historical problem. It is still part of modern nursery biology.

Some pigs may go several days with little meaningful solid feed intake, drawing on limited body reserves. This impairs health, gut function, and even lifetime performance. In contrast, piglets that begin eating immediately after weaning, no matter how little, better preserve gut architecture and body reserves.

A first-week post-weaning intake of around 250 g/day is considered exceptional, as it roughly matches the intake of milk solids before weaning. Most commercial programs achieve something closer to 100 to 200 g/day during the same period. This is not ideal, but it can still be satisfactory for gut health and overall condition when balanced against feed cost and total pig productivity in a low-margin system.

Feed intake comes before nutrition

Lack of meaningful early post-weaning feed intake is often a behavioral problem. Piglets that had no prior exposure to creep feed do not automatically understand that dry feed in a feeder has replaced milk from the sow. They investigate, root, follow pen mates, and learn through repeated exposure. This is why the first feed after weaning must be visible, accessible, fresh, attractive, and easy to discover. Feed formulation still matters, but presentation often determines whether the formulation is eaten.

Mat feeding is feed training

Mat feeding works because it brings feed into the piglet's normal exploratory zone. A small amount of feed placed on a clean mat stimulates rooting, communal activity, and early tasting. In early University of Illinois work, newly weaned pigs around 5.5 kg more than doubled daily gain during the first three days when feed was offered on mats, and seven-day weight gain improved by about 25%. The value was not magic. The pigs simply started eating sooner.

The first 72 hours matter most

Mat feeding should be used mainly as a short-term starting tool. The target is the first two to three days, or until pigs are clearly using the feeder. Feeding too much on mats, or feeding for too many days, can reduce the incentive to develop normal self-feeding behavior.

This is the common mistake. Mat feeding is not meant to become the nursery feeding system. It is meant to bridge the gap between weaning and feeder use. Piglets should not be weaned twice: first from the sow, and then again from the mat

Small fresh meals beat large piles

The practical rule is to provide only what pigs can clean up quickly on a mat, usually within about 30 minutes. Large piles create waste, stale feed, fouling, and uneven intake. Small fresh meals encourage repeated interest without replacing the feeder. In many systems, two to four mat feedings per day are enough, depending on weaning age, pig quality, labor availability, and health status. The more vulnerable the pigs, the more carefully the routine must be managed.

Placement controls success

Mats should be placed near feeders to encourage feed and feeder discovery, but away from drinkers, corners, and dirty areas. Wet or fouled mats quickly become unattractive and wasteful. Mats with rims and grooves help keep feed in place, especially with pellets. On solid floors, a shallow wide-surface feeder may work better than a flat mat. The principle is not the mat itself. The principle is clean, visible, shared feed access during the learning period.

Watch the tail, not only the average

One of the hidden values of mat feeding is observation. Strong or experienced pigs find feed quickly. Slow and naïve pigs hesitate, miss feeding episodes, or fail to move from mat to feeder. These pigs form the tail of the nursery group, and they often determine medication cost, mortality, fallback numbers, and market uniformity. Mat feeding helps identify them early, when support still has value. The average pen may look acceptable while the lower 20% is already falling behind.

In brief, mat feeding remains useful because newly weaned piglets still need to be taught to eat. The method is simple, but the management must be disciplined. Use small fresh amounts, place mats correctly, stop before pigs become dependent on floor feeding, and watch which pigs fail to transition to the feeder.

The lesson is larger than mat feeding. Early nursery nutrition is not only about what is formulated. It is about whether the piglet learns to consume the actual feed. In the first days after weaning, feed presentation, behavior, intake, gut integrity, and lifetime performance are all strongly connected.

Mat feeding is not floor feeding.
It is feed training.

SWINE EDITION | 14 July 2026

Originally distributed through the Feeds & Feeding newsletter at LinkedIn. Archived permanently by Animal Nutrition Academy at www.animalnutritionacademy.com

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