

Stage 1: Breeding

A gilt is a female pig that has not given birth to a litter of piglets. Once she has given birth, she is called a sow.

A sow weighs 200–250 kg on average.

Approximately 40% of sows in the UK live outside; this will be different in other parts of the world.



To become pregnant, the sow will need to be mated by a boar (a male pig) or artificially inseminated (AI) using specialist equipment.

The sow will be checked 4–6 weeks later to find out if she is pregnant. The stockperson will use an ultrasound scanner to do this.



The pregnancy (gestation period) will last for three months, three weeks and three days.

A sow can give birth (farrow) twice a year.



Stage 2: Birth (farrowing)

A sow gives birth (known as farrowing) in specialist maternity accommodation.

Outdoor sows usually give birth in separate huts, known as farrowing arcs (as above).



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For indoor sows, accommodation often consists of individual farrowing pens, which help protect the piglets.

When they are born, piglets weigh about 1–1.5 kg. Litter sizes range from 12–16 piglets, although this might be higher or lower depending on the breed and individual sow.

Piglets stay with their mum (sow) for 4–8 weeks, depending on the farming system, before being weaned.

The sow will be mated around five days after weaning and the breeding cycle starts again.

On average, each sow will have six litters in her lifetime.

The stockperson's most important job is to look after the health and welfare of the sow and piglets.

The pig cycle



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Stage 3: Weaning (nursery)

After about four weeks, the piglets will be moved into specialist accommodation with other piglets of the same age. The piglets will weigh about 7 kg.



Weaned piglets are generally reared indoors. This could be in straw yards or sophisticated pens with controlled ventilation and humidity, and specialist flooring.



Stage 4: Finishing

At 12–13 weeks of age, when they weigh about 35 kg, the pigs will be moved to specialist finishing accommodation. This will have more space for them to continue growing.

The pigs will have several different diets. Their feed will generally be cereal-based and are supplemented with vitamins and minerals to support their health and growth.

The pigs will normally be sent to the abattoir at 5–7 months of age, when they weigh approximately 100–120 kg.



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