Transition period in sows, dynamics of respiratory rate of sows in correlation with the moment of parturition

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Abstract. This transition period surrounding parturition, focusing on the influence of seasonal variation. Respiratory rates were monitored in 160 sows (40 per season, evenly split between breeds) across three key stages: 24–12 hours pre-parturition, 12–4 hours pre-parturition, and 24 hours post-parturition. The results revealed significant seasonal and breed-specific variations: Pre-Parturition: Landrace sows exhibited higher respiratory rates in summer (63 breaths/min) compared to winter (54 breaths/min), indicating potential heat stress. Great White sows maintained lower pre-parturition rates, with a range from 52 breaths/min (summer and winter) to 59 breaths/min (autumn). During Labor: Across all seasons, respiratory rates peaked during labor, with Landrace sows reaching a maximum of 102 breaths/min in summer, while Great White sows achieved similar peaks of 102 breaths/min in autumn. Post-parturition, the respiratory rates normalized within 24 hours, with minor variations across seasons. Rates ranged from 23–31 breaths/min in Landrace and 22–26 breaths/min in Great White sows. These findings highlight the influence of seasonal conditions on the respiratory physiology of sows during parturition. Understanding these dynamics can improve management practices to mitigate heat stress and enhance animal welfare during the critical transition period.
Key Words: sows, respiratory rate, parturition, seasonal variation, animal welfare.

Introduction. The transition period surrounding parturition is a critical phase in the reproductive cycle of sows, significantly impacting maternal well-being, piglet viability, and overall reproductive performance (Cronin et al 1991). Physiological changes during this period are extensive, including alterations in metabolic activity, hormonal profiles, and respiratory patterns (Edwards 2002). Monitoring these changes provides valuable insights into the health status and adaptability of sows, particularly under varying environmental conditions (European Food Safety Authority 2007; Fraser 1997).

Respiratory rate is a key physiological parameter that reflects the sow's response to environmental stressors, including heat stress, which is particularly pronounced during the summer months (Hanenberg et al 2001). Elevated respiratory rates can indicate thermal discomfort or underlying stress, both of which can adversely affect sow performance and piglet outcomes (Field 2013; National Pork Board 2020). Seasonal variation further complicates the management of sows during the transition period, as extreme temperatures—whether hot or cold—can influence respiratory dynamics, metabolic demands, and overall welfare (Farmer & Quesnel 2009; Hacker 1979).

This study focuses on evaluating respiratory rate patterns in Landrace and Great White sows during the transition period, with an emphasis on seasonal influences (Prunier et al 2010; Taverne & Noakes 2009). By examining respiratory dynamics at three critical time points (pre-parturition, during labor, and post-parturition), this research aims to identify breed-specific and seasonal trends (Quiniou et al 2002; Zar 2010). The findings will inform management strategies to mitigate environmental stress, improve welfare, and enhance productivity in sow herds (Peltoniemi et al 2016).

Material and Method. This study evaluated the respiratory rate dynamics of Landrace (L) and Great White (MA) sows during the transition period surrounding parturition. The experiment was conducted across four seasons (spring, summer, autumn, and winter) to assess the influence of seasonal variation on respiratory patterns.

Animals. The specimens used in the study are as follows:

- Population: A total of 160 sows were included in the study:
    - 80 Landrace sows (20 per season)
    - 80 Great White sows (20 per season)
- Health and parity: All sows were healthy, multiparous individuals selected based on uniform age, parity, and body condition scores.

Data collection. The primary data consisted of:

1. Monitoring periods:
    - Respiratory rates were recorded at three critical time points:
        1. Pre-Parturition (24–12 hours): Evaluated to establish baseline respiratory dynamics (Peltoniemi et al 2016).
        2. During Labor (12–4 hours before birth): Recorded to assess peak physiological stress.
        3. Post-Parturition (24 hours after birth): Measured to evaluate recovery and normalization of respiratory patterns.
2. Environmental conditions:
    - Sows were housed in temperature-controlled facilities with conditions monitored daily:
        - Summer: Mean ambient temperature = 28°C.
        - Winter: Mean ambient temperature = 12°C.
        - Spring/Autumn: Temperatures ranging between 16°C and 22°C.
3. Respiratory rate measurement:
    - Respiratory rates (breaths/min) were manually counted by trained personnel over a one-minute interval during rest periods to minimize variability.

Data analysis. The statistical differences were determined as follows:

1. Statistical evaluation:
    - Data were analyzed using a two-way ANOVA to assess the effects of breed and season on respiratory rates.
    - Post-hoc comparisons were performed using Tukey's test to identify significant differences between groups.
2. Key metrics:
    - Mean respiratory rates and standard deviations for each group were calculated at all time points.
    - Seasonal variations were quantified to determine the extent of environmental impact on each breed.
3. Software:
    - Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS software (v26), with significance set at $p<0.05$.

Ethical considerations. All procedures were conducted in compliance with animal welfare guidelines and approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee. Efforts were made to ensure minimal stress during data collection, with strict adherence to humane handling practices.

Results and Discussion. This methodology ensures reliable data collection and robust analysis of respiratory dynamics in sows under varying environmental conditions, providing insights for optimizing management strategies.

Table 1
Respiratory rate dynamics in Landrace and Great White sows before, during and 24 hours after parturition

Season	Breed	No. sows	Before parturition						During labor		24 hours postpartum	
			24–12 hours		12–4 hours		4 hours					
			Normal	Dev.	Normal	Dev.	Normal	Dev.	Normal	Dev.	Normal	Dev.
Spring	L	20	56	-	101	-	73	-	33	-	25	-
Spring	MA	20	55	-	100	-	75	-	41	-	26	-
Summer	L	20	63	-	102	-	70	-	42	-	31	-
Summer	MA	20	52	-	94	-	78	-	39	-	22	-
Autumn	L	20	60	-	99	-	74	-	38	-	24	-
Autumn	MA	20	59	-	102	-	74	-	40	-	22	-
Winter	L	20	54	-	93	-	72	-	36	-	23	-
Winter	MA	20	52	-	99	-	79	-	41	-	25	-

The data presented in Table 1 summarizes the normal and abnormal behaviors or outcomes (deviation) observed in sows in different seasons and stages of parturition: prepartum, during labor, and postpartum (Fraser 1995). Below is the interpretation of the dataset:

Variables and key points:

1. Seasons: The observations are grouped by season (Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter).
2. Breed: Two breeds are observed — L (Landrace) and MA (a specific breed, e.g., maternal line or mixed ancestor).
3. Number of sows: The number of sows sampled per category is 20 for each group.
4. Observation stages:

Before parturition: Split into intervals: 24–12 hours and 12–4 hours before.
During labor: Observations during labor.
24 hours postpartum: Divided into 4-hour intervals postpartum.

5. Outcome metrics:

Normal: Indicates normal behaviors or conditions observed.
Deviations: Indicates abnormal outcomes or conditions.

Observations and trends:

1. Seasonal differences:

Across all breeds and stages, normal observations are consistent, and there are no recorded deviations.
Small fluctuations in normal counts occur across seasons and breeds but do not suggest significant seasonal impact.

2. Breed differences:

Both breeds (L and MA) have similar patterns, with MA slightly outperforming L in terms of normal outcomes, particularly during labor (e.g., Winter MA has 79 normal during labor vs. 72 for Winter L).

3. Stage of observation:

Before parturition: Normal counts are higher during the earlier interval (24–12 hours) and slightly lower in the later interval (12–4 hours).
During labor: Normal counts are consistently high, with a slight breed variation.
24 hours postpartum: Counts for normal observations reduce compared to the earlier stages.

General insights:

- No deviations recorded: The lack of deviations might indicate efficient management practices or limited variability within the observed cohort.
- Consistency across seasons and breeds: Observations are relatively stable, with no significant outliers or anomalies across seasons or breeds.
- Postpartum decline: Normal counts tend to decrease postpartum compared to during labor, reflecting potential physiological or behavioral adjustments.

Conclusions. Across all seasons, breeds, and stages of observation, no deviations were recorded. This indicates a high level of consistency in normal outcomes, suggesting excellent animal management practices or controlled environmental factors. The differences in normal observations across seasons are minor, with no clear seasonal influence on the outcomes. This suggests that external environmental factors tied to seasons did not significantly impact sow behavior or physiology in this study. Both breeds (L and MA) demonstrated similar outcomes across all stages. However, the MA breed showed slightly higher normal counts during labor and postpartum, indicating potentially better performance under these conditions. Regarding the postpartum decline in normal observations, a consistent trend of reduced normal counts 24 hours postpartum compared to earlier stages suggests that physiological or behavioral changes postpartum may introduce minor variations in outcomes. The study demonstrates highly favorable conditions for sows across all measured parameters. The absence of recorded deviations and stable trends across seasons and breeds underline effective management strategies. Further research could focus on identifying subtle factors influencing postpartum outcomes or potential breed-specific responses.

Conflict of interest. The author declares no conflict of interest.

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