

Bringing home the bacon— Are you ready to raise your own pork?

A happy, healthy animal means a meat product that will make you a happy, healthy consumer! If you've been wondering if you're ready to take on raising your own meat but are worried about biting off more than you can chew, here are four key questions to consider.

1. Do I have the space?

Pen size: A juvenile pig of around 50 pounds needs 4–6 square feet of living space, but by the

time your swine reaches a market weight of around 250–280 pounds, it will need 12–15 square feet of space. Pigs are social animals and do better when they have a companion. If there are two pigs, you'll need to double your pen requirements.

Feed storage: Feed should be fresh, protected from rodents and other pests, and kept dry (if it is dry feed). If you store feed outside, a raised, tight feed bin is recommended.



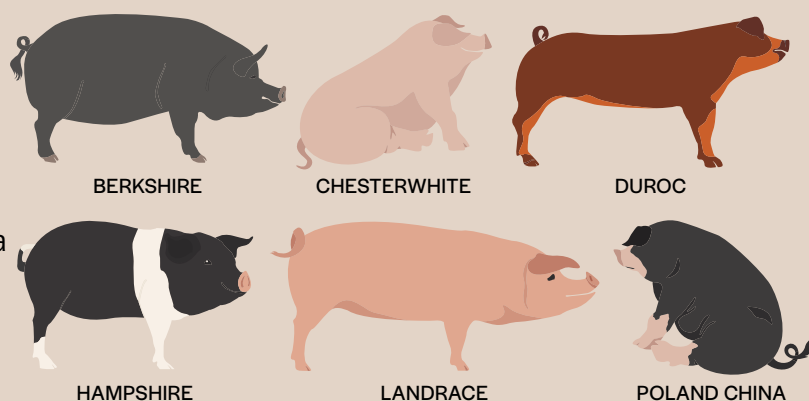
Kim Sutton, www.thepigpen.com

Recommended breeds

Marbled meat: Berkshire, Chester White

Leaner meat: Duroc, Hampshire

Larger carcasses: American Landrace, Poland China



2. Do I have the equipment & resources?

Pen materials: Pigs require a fenced-in area, adequate shelter, and proper bedding. Pigs are very curious and strong, so a well-built, hog-tight fence is necessary to keep them safe and secure. Make sure that the bottom portion of the fence is made of hog-tight material and extends into the ground so they can't crawl or dig under it. One option is a 4-strand fence with 2 feet of hog paneling aboveground and an additional 1 foot belowground.

Pigs do not have fur or a rumen to make their own body heat the way animals like sheep and cows do, so they get cold easily. Adequate shelter when it is cold means a 3- to 3½-sided shed with at least 1 foot of wheat straw that they can burrow in and stay warm.

In hot weather, a large shaded area and daily access to water or a very watery mud hole are required to keep pigs cool. Wyoming nights can still be chilly, even in summer, so straw is still recommended. Wood chips on the bottom of a pen can be excellent absorbers for keeping a pen fresh and clean but should be covered with straw for warmth, especially in colder weather.

A note on kitchen scraps

Pigs are omnivores and can eat a wide variety of foods. However, if you decide to feed them leftover scraps from your kitchen, you need to be aware that pigs are susceptible to many human diseases that can be transmitted through your leftover food. There are also some types of scraps that should never be fed to pigs. For more information and guidelines, visit <https://bit.ly/usda-aphis-swine-health>.

Food & nutrition: Water is the most important nutrient you can give your pig. Make sure it is fresh, clean, and cool, and check on it as often as you can. Ideally, provide at least two options for drinking water; for example, you could use a gravity-fed drip waterer and an open bucket.

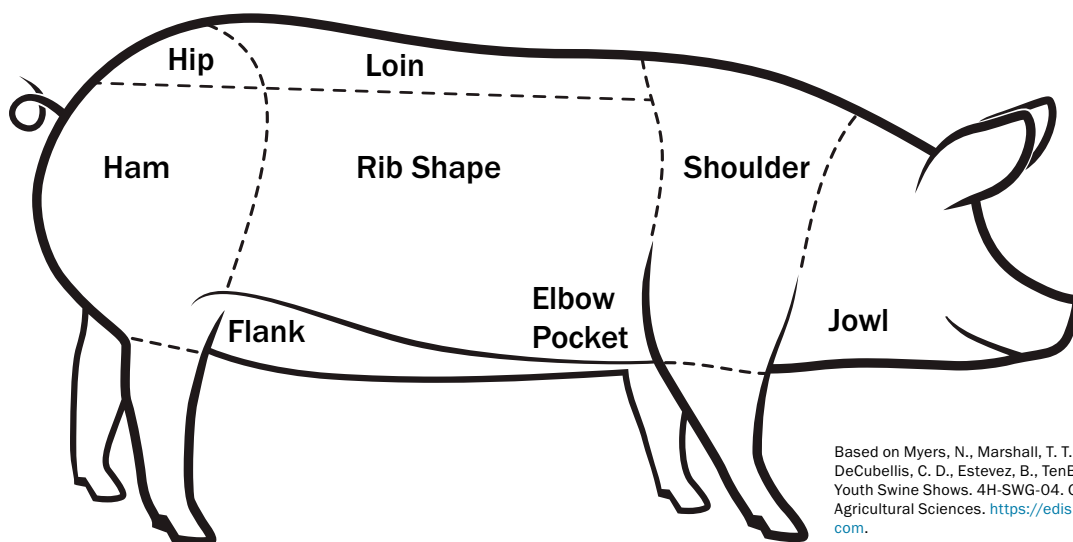
Your pig's caloric needs will change throughout its life. At a weight of less than 50 pounds, it will require what is called a "starter" diet, which consists of a certain ratio of carbs, fats, and proteins. When your pig reaches 100 pounds and beyond, a "grower-finisher" diet with a different ratio of carbs, fats, and proteins is necessary. Talk to your vet or trusted feed store about what feed options are available in your area, and which would be best for your budget and your pig.

Vitamins and minerals are usually provided through quality pig feed. Supplements should only be given after consulting with your veterinarian. Lysine (an amino acid) is important for your growing pig's health so make sure to read your feed labels.

3. Do I have the time?

The number one thing you can do to ensure a healthy pork product is to pay attention to the behavior and environment of your pig. This means spending a minimum of a few minutes twice a day at feeding times to check on your pig, watch its behavior, and make sure it is eating and drinking normally.

Determining finishing weight (time from purchase to processing): Typically, pigs are sent to butcher between seven and nine months of age and usually weigh around 260–280 pounds. This age and weight range may differ based on genetic composition and breed makeup.



Parts of a pig. Evaluate these areas when determining whether a pig is ready for processing.

Based on Myers, N., Marshall, T. T., Walker, W. R., Prichard, D. L., Heltemes, B., DeCubellis, C. D., Estevez, B., TenBroeck, S. H., & Carr, C. (2012). Selecting Pigs for Youth Swine Shows. 4H-SWG-04. Gainesville: University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/4h210> and onionastudio, [stock.adobe.com](https://www.stock.adobe.com).

The following visual cues can help you assess when your pig is ready to be processed. Swine fat deposition starts at the front and moves to the back and from the top to the bottom. Areas of fat evaluation include the jowl, the elbow pocket right behind the front leg, over the blade, the rib cage and over the loin, the flank, and the ham seam. Hogs should be smooth over their rib cage, smooth in their ham-loin junction, and have a fresh, but full, jowl and flank line.

Another way to determine whether a hog is ready for butchering is their feed efficiency. If you have access to a scale and can weigh your pig, you can determine their daily gain of pounds versus intake of feed pounds. Generally, three pounds of grain equals one pound of weight gain. When this starts to slow down, your pig is probably approaching finishing weight. However, this varies by breed and environmental conditions.

Time to process: Butchering your own animal is a whole book in itself, requiring an investment of time and tools, but a rewarding journey if you choose to take it. Finding a processor is much easier, though you may have to travel to find one with an opening. Meat processors are especially busy at certain times of the year (August and September after fairs, for example) and the earlier you can secure their services, the better.

4. Do I have the knowledge?

Know what is normal: You don't have to be a swine disease expert to practice good swine husbandry. If you know what basic healthy pig behaviors are, you can quickly recognize when something is not right and fix it

early. Normal pig behaviors include rooting, wallowing, rubbing, and socializing. A healthy pig has a good appetite and consumes plenty of water.

The vital signs you can monitor include heart rate (60–80 bpm in adult pigs), breathing (not too labored, shallow, or wheezy), temperature (102–104°F in adult pigs), and skin condition (smooth, hydrated, not red or blotchy).

Vet relationship: Establishing a good relationship from the beginning, with a vet who has experience with pigs, is essential. Pigs can have health issues that are quite different from household pets or other farm animals. A vet that is familiar with their particular tendencies ensures you get the right care right out of the gate for a happy, healthy pork product at the finish!

Swine experts **Emily Haver** and **Bryce McKenzie** are well prepared to bring home the bacon. Haver is a 4-H educator based in Carbon County and can be reached at ehaver@uwyo.edu or (307) 328-2642. McKenzie is a 4-H educator based in Johnson County and can be reached at bmcken7@uwyo.edu or (307) 684-7522.



Duroc piglets

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