PIG NUTRITION

Feeding pigs by stage: a practical guide to phase feeding

How to match feed to each stage of a pig's life, from creep feed to finisher and the breeding herd, and how to use feed conversion ratio to check your feeding pays.

By FeedSport Nutrition Team · Published 6 October 2026 · Updated 28 October 2026 · 8 min read

KEY POINTS

- Feed is usually 60–75% of the cost of raising a pig to market, so how you feed drives profit.
- Step pigs down to lower-protein diets as they grow: pre-starter, starter, grower, then finisher.
- Sows and boars need their own gestation, lactation and breeder feeds.
- Track feed conversion ratio (FCR) per pen to see whether your feeding is paying off.

Feed is the single biggest cost in pig production, usually around 60 to 75% of what it costs to raise a pig to market. That means the way you feed has more effect on your profit than almost any other decision on the farm.

Many smallholder and commercial farmers still give one feed to pigs of all ages. It seems simpler, but it wastes money in two directions. Young pigs get too little protein to grow well, while older pigs get more protein than they can use and simply excrete the expensive surplus.

This article explains how to match feed to each stage of a pig's life, a practice called phase feeding, and how to check whether your feeding is actually paying off.

What phase feeding is

Phase feeding means changing the diet as the pig grows, so that what it eats matches what its body needs at that moment. A piglet and a finishing pig are almost different animals in terms of nutrition.

The logic is simple. A young pig is building muscle and bone fast, so it needs a feed rich in protein, especially the amino acid lysine, and easy to digest. As the pig gets older, growth slows and more of what it eats goes to fat and maintenance. Its need for protein falls, while its appetite for energy stays high.

Protein sources such as soybean meal and fishmeal are the most expensive ingredients in a pig diet. Energy sources such as maize are cheaper. So each time you step a pig down to a lower-protein diet at the

right weight, you cut the cost per kilogram of feed without hurting growth.

Most farms use four to five feeds for growing pigs, plus separate feeds for sows. The table below gives a general picture. Exact figures vary with breed, genetics and feed supplier, so treat these as approximate guides rather than fixed rules.

Stage	Typical live weight	Approximate crude protein	Main goal
Pre-starter (creep)	2 to 8 kg	20 to 22%	Get piglets eating solid feed before weaning
Starter (weaner)	8 to 25 kg	18 to 20%	Keep pigs growing through the stress of weaning
Grower	25 to 60 kg	16 to 18%	Build lean muscle efficiently
Finisher	60 kg to market	14 to 16%	Reach market weight at the lowest feed cost

Will your next batch of pigs make a profit?

Enter your number of pigs, feed prices and selling price in the pig farming profit calculator. It works out the feed for each stage, your total costs, the cash you need and your estimated profit, so you can see whether a batch pays before you buy.

Estimate my costs and profit

Check my numbers with FeedSport

Pre-starter and starter: getting weaners off to a strong start

The first weeks of a pig's life set the pace for everything that follows. A piglet that stalls after weaning often reaches market days or weeks later than its penmates, eating extra feed the whole way.

Pre-starter (often called creep feed) is offered to piglets while they are still suckling, usually from about 7 to 10 days old. They eat very little of it at first. The point is to get their gut used to solid feed, so weaning is less of a shock.

Weaning is stressful. The piglet loses its mother's milk, is often moved and mixed with other litters, and its gut is still immature. It is common for weaners to eat little for the first day or two and lose condition. A good starter feed helps by being:

- **Highly digestible**, with ingredients such as milk products, cooked cereals and quality protein that a young gut can handle
- **Palatable**, so pigs start eating quickly
- **Rich in lysine** and other amino acids for fast muscle growth
- **Fresh**, offered little and often so it does not go stale in the feeder

These diets cost more per bag than grower or finisher feed, but pigs eat only small amounts of them. Cutting corners here tends to cost more later in slow growth and scouring.

Change from pre-starter to starter gradually over a few days by mixing the two feeds. Sudden changes upset the gut.

Weaners stalling after weaning?

A good creep and starter feed is the cheapest way to keep piglets growing through weaning. Ask us which creep and starter feeds suit your litters.

Ask about starter feeds

Grower: building lean muscle

The grower phase runs from roughly 25 kg to 60 kg. This is when pigs convert feed into lean meat most efficiently, so it is the stage where good feeding pays off fastest.

Growers should have feed available at all times, or be fed enough that a little is left in the feeder at each meal. Restricting feed at this stage usually slows growth more than it saves money.

The diet can now rely more on locally available ingredients like maize and soybean meal, balanced with a vitamin and mineral premix. Protein drops a little from the starter feed, but amino acid balance still matters. A grower feed short of lysine will produce a fatter, slower-growing pig even if the crude protein figure on the label looks fine. For more on this, see feeding growers: protein, energy and lysine in practice.

Water is just as important as feed. A growing pig drinks roughly two to three litres of water for every kilogram of feed it eats, more in hot weather. If drinkers are blocked or the water is warm and dirty, feed intake and growth drop.

Finisher: reaching market weight at the lowest cost

From about 60 kg until slaughter, pigs eat the largest amount of feed of their lives. A finisher can eat 2.5 to 3 kg a day, so even a small saving per kilogram of feed adds up quickly across a batch.

At this stage the pig's need for protein is at its lowest, while its appetite is at its highest. Feeding a grower diet to finishers is one of the most common and expensive mistakes on pig farms. The extra protein does not produce extra meat; the pig simply breaks it down and excretes it.

The flip side is fat. If finishers get more energy than they need, they lay down excess back fat, and many abattoirs pay less for fat carcasses. Your target market matters here. Talk to your buyer about the carcass weight and grade they pay best for, and plan your finishing period around it. The pig farming profit calculator

works out your profit at each selling weight, so you can test what your buyer pays.

Keep pigs on finisher feed through to market rather than switching back to cheaper scraps or bran in the final weeks. Those last weeks are when the pig puts on weight that you are paid for.

Sows and boars: feeding the breeding herd

Breeding animals need their own feeds because their goals are different. You are not trying to grow them as fast as possible; you are trying to keep them productive for many litters.

Gestation (pregnant sows). A pregnant sow needs a moderate, controlled ration, typically around 2 to 2.5 kg a day of a gestation feed, adjusted to her body condition. Too much feed makes sows fat, which can lead to difficult farrowing and poor appetite later when she is feeding piglets. Too little leaves her thin and weakens the next litter. Many farmers raise the ration slightly in the last three to four weeks of pregnancy, when the piglets grow fastest.

Lactation (sows with piglets). Once she farrows, the sow's needs change sharply. Producing milk for a full litter takes a lot of energy and protein, so she should move onto a richer lactation feed and be fed generously. Build up her intake over the first few days after farrowing, then let her eat as much as she wants. A sow that loses too much condition while feeding a litter is slower to come back on heat and may have smaller litters next time.

Boars. A working boar needs a balanced diet that keeps him fit and active without getting fat, often around 2 to 3 kg a day of a breeder feed, depending on his size and how often he is used.

Feed conversion ratio: measuring whether your feeding pays

Feed conversion ratio (FCR) tells you how many kilograms of feed it takes to produce one kilogram of live weight gain. It is the most useful single number for judging your feeding.

> **FCR = feed eaten (kg) ÷ weight gained (kg)**

A lower FCR is better. For example, if a batch of pigs eats 1,500 kg of feed and gains a total of 500 kg, the FCR is 1,500 ÷ 500 = 3.0. Each kilogram of weight gain cost 3 kg of feed.

To work it out on your farm:

1. Weigh the pigs, or a sample of them, when they go into a pen. A weighband is a cheap option if you have no scale.
2. Record every bag of feed that goes into that pen.
3. Weigh the pigs again when they leave, or at the end of each feeding phase.
4. Divide total feed used by total weight gained.

As a rough guide, young weaners convert feed very efficiently, often at an FCR below 2, while finishers are closer to 3 or higher. Your overall figure from weaning to market depends on genetics, health and housing as well as feed.

The real value comes from tracking FCR over time. If it suddenly worsens, look for causes such as feed wastage, disease, poor water supply, cold or overcrowded pens, or a change in feed quality. To turn FCR into money, see feed cost per kg of gain, or enter your FCR for each stage in the pig farming profit calculator and see how your profit changes.

Want a second opinion on your FCR?

Send us your pen records: pig weights in and out and the feed used. We will work out your FCR with you and show you where feed is being lost.

Send your pen records

Common feeding mistakes and how to avoid them

- **One feed for all ages.** Young pigs grow slowly and older pigs waste protein. Use at least a starter, grower and finisher feed.
- **Feed wastage.** Badly adjusted or overfilled feeders can waste 5 to 10% of feed or more. Set feeders so only a small amount of feed shows in the trough, and fix broken ones quickly.
- **Diluting balanced feed.** Mixing a complete feed with extra maize, bran or kitchen waste upsets its balance. If you do mix your own feed, use a concentrate or premix designed for that purpose and follow the mixing guide.
- **Poor storage.** Feed kept in damp or hot conditions can grow mould, which may produce toxins that cut growth and harm sow fertility. Store bags off the floor, away from walls, in a dry, cool place, and use older stock first.
- **Sudden feed changes.** Switching diets overnight can cause scouring and a dip in intake. Mix old and new feed over three to five days.
- **Ignoring water.** Pigs that cannot drink enough will not eat enough. Check drinkers daily.

Putting it into practice

Phase feeding is not complicated. It comes down to giving each pig the feed that matches its age and weight, changing diets gradually, cutting wastage, and keeping records so you can see what is working.

Start small if you need to. Even moving from one feed to separate grower and finisher feeds, and tracking FCR on a single pen, will show you where your money is going.

Match the right feed to every stage

Whether you keep a few sows or run a commercial unit, our nutrition team will help you choose feeds for each stage of your herd and plan when to switch.

WhatsApp the team | Other ways to contact us

Need a diet checked? Send your ingredients and targets to the FeedSport nutrition team on WhatsApp +263 77 468 4534 or sales@feedsport.co.zw.

Figures in this guide are typical values and general ranges. Confirm targets for your animals, genetics and ingredients, and check batch specifications before formulating.