

HSA's view

While animals continue to be reared and slaughtered for food it is important that every effort is made to protect their well-being. The HSA seeks humane methods of slaughter. This means that all animals without exception should be properly stunned and rendered unconscious before their throats are cut. The Society also believes that those handling and slaughtering animals must be fully trained and competent to take responsibility for the livestock in their care.

What does the HSA do?

The Humane Slaughter Association is the only registered charity which specialises in the welfare of food animals throughout the marketing and slaughter processes. It is an independent organisation beholden to neither government, trade nor emotional pressures and is thus able to play an unbiased role in promoting the humane treatment of food animals, from farms, through markets to the point of slaughter.

It achieves its aim by lectures and practical demonstrations of stunning methods; by publishing educational material such as videotapes and fact sheets; by funding research projects; and by providing new equipment. Specially trained technical staff are able to give rational advice and accurate information to those interested in food animal welfare issues.

How can you help?

HSA depends upon voluntary subscriptions, donations and legacies for its income. Support is needed from both individuals and corporate groups so that the Association may continue to play an effective role in the welfare of food animals.

The annual subscription for individual members is £15, for corporate groups £50 and for those in full-time education £5.

**The Old School, Brewhouse Hill,
Wheathampstead, Herts AL4 8AN**
t: +44 (0)1582 831919
f: +44 (0)1582 831414
e: info@hsa.org.uk
w: www.hsa.org.uk

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A FEW QUESTIONS ANSWERED



Why are animals killed?

The majority of people in the UK eat red meat as part of their staple diet. This means that animals are specially reared on farms to be slaughtered for food.

How many animals are killed?

Each week the number of animals killed in slaughterhouses in the UK is approximately 60 thousand cattle, 300 thousand sheep and 250 thousand pigs.

Where are animals killed?

Animals must pass through a licensed slaughterhouse if their meat is to be sold for human consumption. Here, an authorized veterinary surgeon is responsible for checking the health and welfare of every animal. There are approximately 350 poultry and red meat slaughterhouses in the UK which vary in size from those dealing with a few animals per week, to large plants killing thousands of animals every day.

How are animals killed?

By law all animals must either be stunned to render them immediately unconscious before their throats are cut and they die from loss of blood; or they must be killed outright using a free bullet, electricity or gas. The only exemption is for non-stun religious slaughter.

Who kills the animals?

A slaughterman must be licensed by the Food Standards Agency (FSA), to restrain, stun, bleed or kill an animal. He or she must be a fit and proper person, over 18 years of age who has proven knowledge and competence to carry out the task humanely and efficiently, without causing avoidable pain, excitement or suffering to any animal.

from farm to food

Are animals in slaughterhouses protected by the law?

In the UK, there are laws to protect animals at the time of slaughter or killing. The MHS is responsible for enforcing the legislation and this is carried out, on-site, by Official Veterinary Surgeons and Meat Inspectors. Every slaughterhouse must also have a member of staff responsible for animal welfare.

What happens before animals are slaughtered?

Animals are taken to slaughterhouses in lorries, either direct from farms or from livestock markets. They are then unloaded into a lairage, where they are penned and provided with clean drinking water. After a period of rest they are moved to the point of kill. The method of slaughter varies according to the species of animal and the size of slaughterhouse.

What happens to cattle?

The law states that all adult cattle must be restrained in a stunning pen, which is usually a solid-sided metal box with a vertical sliding door at one end to allow the animal to enter. The pen must have a device which restricts the movement of the animal's head to permit accurate stunning. The majority of cattle in the UK are stunned with a captive-bolt pistol.

The slaughterman stands on a platform, in front or to one side of the pen, and shoots the animal. Alternatively, cattle may be stunned using electricity. Following stunning, the pen side opens and the unconscious animal rolls out of the pen, shackled by one hind leg, hoisted on to an overhead conveyor and moved to the bleed area. Here the animal is stuck, which involves cutting the main blood vessels in the throat, so that it dies from loss of blood.

What happens to sheep?

In large abattoirs, sheep are often mechanically carried to the stunning area in a V-shaped restrainer conveyor; in small plants they are moved in groups to a pen where they are individually stunned. Sheep may be stunned using either electricity or a captive-bolt pistol. They are then shackled, hoisted and stuck.

What happens to pigs?

Pigs may be brought to the stunning point in a restrainer conveyor, or be penned in groups and stunned individually using electricity. Carbon dioxide anaesthesia is also used in a number of larger abattoirs. The unconscious animals are then shackled by one hind leg, hoisted and stuck.

How does a captive-bolt pistol work?

There are two types of stunner, one trigger-activated and one which discharges on contact with the animal's head. A sharp, hollow-ended steel bolt, propelled by a blank cartridge or by compressed air, penetrates the animal's forehead and brain and then automatically retracts. This renders the animal immediately unconscious and insensible to pain.

How is electrical stunning achieved?

There are two basic types of electrical stunning equipment used for sheep and pigs.

In **head-only** stunning, hand held scissor-like tongs are placed on both sides of the animal's head so that the brain lies between the electrodes. These must then deliver sufficient electrical current through the animal's brain to produce immediate unconsciousness.

With **head-to-body** equipment the animal must be held in a restrainer. Electrodes are placed over the head and back, passing a direct current through the brain and heart, simultaneously stunning the animal and causing a cardiac arrest.

Head-to-body stunning may also be used for cattle.

The main difference between the two types is that head-only stunning produces a reversible stun which must immediately be followed-up by bleeding, whilst head-to-body results in an irreversible stun, ie death.

How is carbon dioxide anaesthesia used?

Pigs are lowered in groups into a chamber containing a minimum concentration of 70% carbon dioxide in air. They will then gradually lose consciousness and must remain in the gas until dead. On release from the chamber they are then hoisted and bled.

What is religious or ritual slaughter?

Licensed Jewish and Muslim slaughtermen are exempt from legislation in the UK which states that animals must be stunned before bleeding. This means that animals destined for the food of Jews and Muslims need not be pre-stunned and will be fully conscious when their throats are cut.