

HSA's view

The HSA aims to promote humane methods of slaughter, handling and transport. This means birds must be slaughtered as close to the point of production as possible and transported in crates and vehicles of a minimum standard to ensure that birds do not suffer injury and distress. In addition, all those handling and killing poultry, both on-farm and at the slaughterhouse, should undergo training to an approved national standard.

Stunning must induce instantaneous unconsciousness. The HSA believes minimum stunning currents should be introduced, along with the regular testing of electrical equipment, to ensure that all birds are properly stunned before slaughter. The use of humane gas killing systems is encouraged.

Whilst poultry are being farmed for food every effort must be made to safeguard their welfare. Poultry slaughter can be humane, but when thousands of birds are stunned and killed every hour it is difficult to protect the welfare of each individual. Improvements in the methods of slaughter are needed to ensure birds do not suffer unnecessarily.

What does the HSA do?

The Humane Slaughter Association is the only registered charity which specialises in the welfare of livestock in markets, during transport and at slaughter. It achieves its aims by arranging practical training sessions, by publishing educational materials, by funding research projects and by providing constructive advice and information. This rational approach continues to achieve significant improvements to food animal welfare.

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.

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A FOWL END ?



The poultry industry

The UK population consumes over a million tonnes of poultry meat each year, in the form of fresh or frozen whole birds or, increasingly, as a variety of processed foods. This creates a massive market for the British poultry industry and over 700 million chickens and 24 million turkeys are farmed and killed annually for their meat. In addition, a niche market is supplied by smaller, more specialised farms producing ducks, geese, quail and guinea fowl.

When commercial egg-laying and breeding hens reach the end of their economically productive life they are also slaughtered. Over 40 million of these, so called, 'spent' hens are killed each year in the UK and their meat is usually processed into such products as chicken pies and soups. The final step in poultry meat production begins when the live birds are transferred from the farm to a poultry slaughter plant.

How are poultry handled and transported?

Most birds are caught and put into crates, or modules, which are then stacked onto lorries for transportation to the poultry slaughter plant. At this time, birds are particularly susceptible to injury and careful handling is essential to prevent unnecessary suffering.

Journeys to the processing plant are usually completed within a few hours, although the limited number of spent hen slaughter plants in the UK may result in these older, frail birds travelling much longer distances.

Where are poultry killed?

The majority of birds are slaughtered in large, licensed poultry processing plants. Here, several thousand birds can be killed every hour, in a factory-like operation. Small producers can slaughter a limited number of birds on the farm. This is legal, although licensing and hygiene requirements restrict the sale of the meat.

Poultry Slaughter

How are poultry slaughtered?

By law, birds must be stunned to render them immediately unconscious until their necks are cut and they die from loss of blood; or killed outright using gas, neck dislocation, decapitation or a free bullet.

1. Electrical stunning followed by neck-cutting

This is the most common method of slaughter and is carried out on a large scale in poultry slaughterhouses. By law, stunning must cause immediate loss of consciousness which lasts until neck-cutting causes death.

In the large processing plants the stunning operation is mechanised to cope with the high throughput of birds. Poultry are manually unloaded from their crates and suspended by their legs on a moving shackle line. After being allowed time to settle, several birds are conveyed into a water bath where their heads are submerged, completing an electrical circuit and causing stunning. Trained staff should then check that all birds are unconscious and insensible when they emerge from the stunner.

Individual birds can be stunned using a low voltage hand-held stunner. Electrodes are applied to the bird's head and an electric current passes through the brain causing a temporary stun.

Whichever method is used, it must be immediately followed by manual or mechanical neck-cutting to ensure death before consciousness is regained. A minimum bleed time must then be allowed before scalding or plucking.

Electrical stunning or electrical killing?

Electrical stunning should cause an instant loss of consciousness, from which the bird can potentially recover if it is not immediately followed up by neck-cutting. Stunning can be induced using a water bath or hand-operated stunner. Alternatively, a water bath can be set to deliver sufficient current to cause a stun-kill. This is irreversible, resulting in a cardiac arrest and immediate loss of brain function. From a welfare point of view, the stun-kill is favoured as it removes the risk of birds regaining consciousness during or after neck-cutting. However, in practice, many plants prefer to use a stun-only policy to prevent possible carcass damage.

2. Gas killing

Gas killing is a legal but relatively new technique operated in large plants with specialised equipment. Transport crates are unloaded from vehicles, and the birds remain in their crates while they are gassed, eliminating the need for live bird shackling. The birds should be killed outright, removing the risk of them regaining consciousness before neck-cutting.

3. Neck dislocation

Neck dislocation, without prior stunning, must induce immediate unconsciousness without causing pain or suffering. In practice this is difficult to achieve as dislocation does not consistently concuss the brain and is unlikely to cause immediate insensibility. It is therefore not recommended for the routine slaughter of poultry and this method should only be carried out by a skilled operator, in an emergency or to kill very small numbers of birds on the farm.

4. Decapitation

Decapitation involves severing the head. It is legal without prior stunning, but is not advised on welfare grounds as there are doubts as to whether it causes immediate unconsciousness.

5. Free bullet

The use of a firearm is a legal method of slaughter, but is neither safe nor practical.

Is poultry slaughter humane?

Whilst UK legislation implies that all the legal methods of slaughter induce immediate unconsciousness; there is scientific evidence to doubt this.

Electrical stunning is a humane method of slaughter but only if electrodes are properly positioned and equipment is maintained to a high standard. Otherwise, birds can suffer pre-stun shocks, poor stunning, paralysis and remain conscious at neck-cutting. In addition, water bath stunners do not deliver a level of electrical current which is controlled for each individual bird. When several birds are immersed in the bath, the current is divided between them and those with a high electrical resistance may receive insufficient current to cause an adequate stun.

A new method of electrical stunning is being researched which can be set to deliver a constant level of current to each individual bird in the water bath. This is a welcome improvement to the present system as each bird will receive sufficient current to cause an effective stun.

Gas killing does have welfare benefits when processing birds on a large scale, providing a non-aversive gas is used and birds are killed whilst still in their transport crates.

Other alternatives are neck dislocation and decapitation, neither of which require pre-stunning, although it is uncertain if either method alone consistently causes instant insensibility. The use of a firearm is not recommended. Whether killing on-farm or at the slaughterhouse, it is the responsibility of slaughter staff to ensure that poultry are killed humanely.