

Slaughter without pre-stunning (for religious purposes)

RSPCA Farm Animals Department *Information Sheet*

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Contents

- **Introduction**
- **About religious slaughter**
- **Key welfare issues**
- **Work of the RSPCA on this issue**
- **How you can help**
- **Recommended further information**

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Introduction

Over 900 million farm animals are killed every year in the UK for meat. Many of these animals are killed by having their throats cut and the vast majority are stunned unconscious before this is done. However, the law allows the Jewish and Muslim communities to slaughter animals

About religious slaughter

What is religious slaughter?

In the UK, the Jewish and Muslim communities are exempt from a section of the law in '*The Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995*' that requires all animals to be stunned before they are slaughtered. Stunning is a process that causes animals to lose consciousness, making them insensible to pain and suffering.

Although there are differences in the way animals are slaughtered by the Shechita (Jewish) and Halal (Muslim) methods, both involve cutting the animal's throat with a very sharp knife, in many cases without any form of stunning. The teachings of the Jewish and Muslim religions state that an animal must be fully alive before it is slaughtered. Accordingly, the stunning of an animal before slaughter may be interpreted as being against such religious teachings.

Within both Jewish and Muslim communities, there are different interpretations of the religious laws. Leaders of some liberal branches of the Jewish faith are prepared to interpret Jewish law in the light of modern customs and knowledge, but others are not. Similarly, some Muslim leaders do not consider that stunning before slaughtering transgresses the laws laid down in the Koran, the Muslim holy book. Other Muslim leaders see it as an offence against law and tradition.

Number of animals slaughtered by religious methods

In 2015 the Food Standards Agency (FSA) published an Animal Welfare Survey undertaken in abattoirs across Great Britain in a one week period in September 2013. The survey provided numbers of animals

by religious methods without any form of stunning. Whilst the RSPCA believes that religious beliefs and practices should be respected, we also believe that animals should only be slaughtered under the most humane conditions.

slaughtered/killed by the Shechita and Halal methods and indicated that a low percentage of animals killed by all methods during this time were not stunned before slaughter; with 2% of cattle, 15% of sheep and goats, and 3% of poultry slaughtered in Great Britain not receiving a pre-slaughter stun¹. The survey showed that around 84% of animals slaughtered by the Halal method were stunned before slaughter.

Laws governing religious slaughter '*The Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995*' sets out specific requirements for the slaughter of animals by the Jewish and Muslim methods. These Regulations implement EC Directive 93/119/EEC. The Regulations state that, amongst other things:

- The animal's throat must be cut by one rapid uninterrupted movement of the knife.
- Both carotid arteries and both jugular veins must be severed.
- The knife used to slaughter the animal must be inspected before each animal is slaughtered to make sure it is of sufficient size and sharpness to slaughter that animal.

Following lobbying by the RSPCA, further amendments to the regulations ('*The Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) (Amendments) Regulations 1999*') also provide that religious slaughter can only take place in a licensed slaughterhouse. This came into force in the UK in March 1999.

Key welfare issues

Slaughter without pre-stunning

In June 2003, the Government's independent advisory body, the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) published its report on the 'Welfare of Farmed Animals at Slaughter or Killing - Part 1: Red Meat Animals'. We believe that this report provides detailed and well-considered information on this difficult question. In undertaking a comprehensive review of all red meat slaughter methods, including religious slaughter practices, members of the FAWC considered evidence from many individuals and organisations, including religious and animal welfare groups, as well as observing the various methods of slaughter for themselves.

Their report focused on three particular animal welfare issues with regard to slaughter without pre-stunning. These were:

- pre-slaughter handling
- the potential for pain and distress during exsanguination
- the time to loss of brain responsiveness.

On the first of these issues, FAWC concluded that the level of restraint required to expose the throat, perform an effective cut and hold the animal still until it had bled out was far greater than that needed for conventional slaughter.

With regard to the potential for pain and distress, FAWC considered the representations it had received, some of which had argued that a neck cut is not painful provided it is a rapid, uninterrupted movement carried out with an extremely sharp knife. FAWC came to the view, however, that when a large transverse incision is made across the neck a number of vital tissues are transected including: skin, muscle, trachea, oesophagus, carotid arteries, jugular veins, major nerve trunks, plus numerous minor nerves. They concluded that such a drastic cut would inevitably trigger a barrage of sensory information to the brain in a sensible (conscious) animal. FAWC stated that: "we are persuaded that such a massive injury would result in very significant pain and distress in the period before insensibility supervenes".

On the issue of time taken to loss of brain responsiveness, FAWC considered the available evidence and concluded that sheep become insensible within 5 to 7 seconds of the cut, and adult cattle between 22 and 40 seconds. FAWC cited work on calves which had shown a variation in the period to insensibility from 10 to 120 seconds. The longer times were the result of occlusion of the carotid arteries. This is a process observed in a proportion of cattle, and particularly in calves, which occurs when the carotid arteries contract after the cut has been made and effectively seal the cut ends, thereby maintaining blood pressure in the brain.

Their recommendations were that: "Council considers that slaughter without pre-stunning is unacceptable and that the Government should repeal the current exemption", and that:

"Until the current exemption which permits slaughter without pre-stunning is repealed, Council recommends that any animal not stunned before slaughter should receive an immediate post-cut stun".

In 2005, the Government issued its final response to the FAWC's 2003 report in the form of a consultation document. The accompanying statement indicated that the Government was not intending to adopt the FAWC's recommendation to repeal a current legal exemption allowing Halal and Kosher meat to be produced in the UK without the animals being stunned, but that it may consider the issue of labelling of meat (see below) from such slaughter methods – on a voluntary basis. The RSPCA responded to the Government's consultation, urging it to consider more carefully the animal welfare implications of allowing continuation of slaughter without pre-stunning, and pressed for compulsory labelling of meat from animals slaughtered in this way. However, the Government again stated that it would not change the law and that slaughter without pre-stunning would continue to be permitted for Jewish and Muslim groups.

Recent research undertaken in New Zealand (Gibson *et al.*, 2009) has provided further evidence of the welfare problems associated with neck cutting of conscious animals. The work showed that brain signals in calves indicate that they do appear to feel pain when slaughtered without pre-stunning. A pain signal lasting for up to 2 minutes was detected following throat cutting. The researchers also showed that when the animals are concussed through stunning, brain signals corresponding to pain disappear.

Labelling of meat from animals slaughtered by religious methods

It has been estimated that less than half of the meat from animals slaughtered by the Jewish methods is sold in Kosher shops. The consumption of certain parts of the animals' hindquarters such as veins, lymphatic and sciatic nerve and its branches, is forbidden under Jewish law. To remove them is a specialised task, which has not been practised in the UK since the 1930's. Consequently, all hindquarters are rejected as not Kosher, as are any carcasses which cannot be consumed as Kosher meat for other reasons (for example, damage to the carcass). A high proportion of the meat which is declared non-Kosher is therefore sold on the open market but is not labelled as meat from animals that have been slaughtered without pre-stunning. Also, it is currently not possible to tell whether meat simply labelled 'Halal' comes from animals that have been pre-stunned or not, before slaughter.

A previous FAWC report (1985) on religious slaughter highlighted this issue, and recommended that all meat from animals slaughtered by religious methods, and offered for sale "...should be clearly labelled to indicate the method of slaughter." However, the law has not been changed to give effect to this recommendation. In its response to the FAWC Report, made in March 2005, the Government indicated that it

would be willing to discuss the issue of labelling with various stakeholder groups.

In 2010, during the European Parliament's First Reading (consideration) of the Commission proposal for a Food Information Regulation, the Parliament proposed that meat from animals slaughtered without stunning should be labelled. In relation to this, in 2011 the then UK Agriculture Minister James Paice stated to the House of Commons: *"We believe people should know what they are buying in shops or when they are eating out, and I have had discussions with the supermarkets, the food and catering industries about the role labelling and point of sale information can play in giving consumers a greater choice. All agree this is a difficult, complex and sensitive issue that cannot easily be resolved in view of the many competing interests involved. We will be looking at this further but, will need to consider the impact of existing EU meat labelling Regulations, before any final decisions are taken."*¹ In 2011 the EU adopted new Regulation

(1169/2011) on food information for consumers, which will bring in mandatory country of origin labelling on meat by December 2013 and will then look at extending this to meat used as an ingredient in other food. There was no agreement under the Regulation on mandatory labelling on how an animal was slaughtered, so the Commission is undertaking a study in 2013 on how to improve the quality of information to consumers on this issue this will also look at the issue of providing consumers with appropriate information about whether the animal was pre-stunned.

Work of the RSPCA on this issue

The RSPCA recognises that religious beliefs and practices should be respected. We also believe that it is important to ensure that animals are slaughtered under the most humane conditions possible. Scientific research has clearly demonstrated that slaughter of an animal without stunning can cause unnecessary suffering. The RSPCA is opposed to the slaughter of any food animal without first rendering it insensible to pain and distress until death supervenes.

We continue to press for changes in legislation that would improve the welfare of the animals at the time of slaughter. Until this occurs, the RSPCA proposes that:

- The Jewish and Muslim communities in the UK should review their slaughter practices. In New Zealand, for example, all animals slaughtered by the Halal method are stunned before slaughter and all animals slaughtered by the Kosher method are stunned shortly after the incision is made in the animal's neck. The progress already made in the UK in these areas should be extended to cover all animals slaughtered.

- All meat produced from animals that have not been stunned before slaughter should be clearly labelled in some way, so that it can be identified by consumers. The RSPCA believes that consumers have the right to choose whether or not they wish to buy meat from animals slaughtered without pre-stunning.

Recommended further information

- FAWC report on *'The Welfare of Farmed Animals at Slaughter or Killing - Part 1: Red Meat Animals'* (2003).
- FAWC report on *'The Welfare of Livestock when Slaughtered by Religious Methods'* (1985).
- Gibson, T.J., Johnson, C.B., Murrell et al. (2009.) *New Zealand Veterinary Journal*. 57:77-85.
- Food Standards Agency (2015) *Food Standards Agency: Results of the 2013 animal welfare survey in Great Britain*. Great Britain: Food Standards Agency

How you can help!

If you eat meat, eggs or dairy products and are concerned about welfare then look out for products carrying the RSPCA's Freedom Food logo. Freedom Food is the RSPCA's farm assurance and food labelling scheme that aims to ensure that animals are reared, handled, transported and slaughtered/killed according to strict RSPCA welfare standards developed and monitored by the RSPCA. The RSPCA welfare standards are informed by scientific evidence and practical experience and amongst other requirements, include detailed provisions relating to the humane handling and slaughter/killing of farm animals, including requiring animals to be stunned prior to slaughter.

If more consumers insist on higher welfare products, more supermarkets will want to stock them, which will encourage more farmers, hauliers and abattoirs to improve their practices and ultimately more farm animals will benefit.

Take part in the RSPCA's campaigns for farm animals by visiting www.rspca.org.uk/campaigns.