

Animal Welfare on Factory Farms: The Treatment of Chickens, Dairy Cows, Beef Cattle, & Pigs



In recent decades, factory farms have become the dominant suppliers of food in the United States. Small and medium-sized farms where animals previously lived on pasture have almost entirely disappeared, and have been replaced by massive commercial operations that confine tens of thousands to millions of animals indoors in a single location. Animals on factory farms are viewed as units of production rather than as sentient beings. All aspects of production in industrial animal agriculture are driven by profit margins. There is no concern for the feelings of animals in these facilities even as they endure the most horrendous and unimaginable cruelties.

Chickens Raised for Meat

Rapid Growth - Chickens raised for meat are selectively bred for unnaturally fast growth and are bred to have abnormally large breasts disproportionate to their body size. As a consequence of this breeding practice, chickens have weak skeletons that cannot support their bodies. They suffer from leg disorders, lameness, deformities, ruptured tendons, metabolic disease, weakened immune systems, and sudden-death syndrome. Studies have shown that between 26% to 30% of "broiler" chickens show difficulty walking and are in pain. Many die from acute heart failure because their lungs and hearts cannot keep pace with their rapidly growing bodies.

Dr. John Webster, Emeritus Professor of Animal Husbandry at the University of Bristol School of Veterinary Science, commented that the chronic pain experienced by broiler chickens as a result of unnaturally rapid growth *"must constitute, in both magnitude and severity, the single most severe, systematic example of man's inhumanity to another sentient animal."*

Confinement - Chickens on industrial farms live indoors in warehouse like buildings that may contain 20,000 birds or more. Each bird is given an amount of floor space the size of an 8" x 11" sheet of paper. This environment prevents the expression of virtually all natural behaviors, such as nesting, foraging, dust bathing, perching, and exploring.

Polluted Air - The floors of these warehouses are covered in the waste produced by tens of thousands of chickens. The resulting high level of ammonia causes chickens to suffer from respiratory problems, pulmonary congestion, hemorrhaging, and even blindness.

Unnatural Lighting - Nearly all broiler chickens in the United States are subjected to continuous dim lighting with only one to four hours of darkness. The purpose of this practice is to further stimulate eating and unnatural growth. Exposure to continuous light prevents animals from resting or sleeping, may result in painful eye conditions, and contributes to the health problems previously described.

Slaughter - Chickens reach market weight when they are approximately 6 to 7 weeks of age. Workers load them into trucks at a rate of 1,000 to 1,500 birds per hour. Injuries such as broken bones and internal hemorrhages are common. The Humane Methods of Slaughter Act, which requires that animals be rendered unconscious prior to slaughter, does not apply to chickens although they experience no less pain than other species.

Dairy Cows

"The amount of work done by the dairy cow in peak lactation is immense. To achieve a comparable high work rate a human would have to jog for about six hours a day, every day." - John Webster, Emeritus Professor at the University of Bristol School of Veterinary Science

Overproduction – Cows on industrial dairies spend their lives in a constant cycle of impregnation, birth, and milking. The amount of milk that dairy cows are forced to produce has continually increased during the past sixty years. In 1950, the average dairy cow produced 5,700 pounds of milk per year. By 2005, each cow produced nearly 20,000 pounds of milk per year.

Confinement - In stark contrast to images of "happy cows " portrayed by the dairy industry, the vast majority of dairy cows in the United States live in intense confinement with no access to pasture. They live indoors on concrete flooring and may spend much of their time connected to a milking machine apparatus. Even some "organic" milk is produced by cows that are confined in factory farm conditions.

Premature weaning - Calves are taken from their mothers almost immediately. Female calves join the dairy herd, and male calves are sold to the beef or veal industries. Veal calves are confined alone in crates so small that they cannot even turn around during their 16 to 18 week lives. Calves may experience extreme distress as a result of being separated from their mothers. Some become sick, stop eating, or cry until their throats become raw. Separating a mother from her calf may require pushing, prodding, and even restraints.

Disease - Dairy cows suffer from numerous health problems as a result of being forced to produce an exceedingly high amount of milk and living in such unnatural and stressful conditions:

- **Mastitis** - An extremely painful swelling of the mammary glands is the most common health problem in dairy cows. Most cases of mastitis result from bacterial infections triggered by trauma from milk machines.
- **Lameness** - Studies have estimated that nearly 25% of dairy cows may suffer from lameness. Hoof lesions caused by concrete flooring and lack of opportunity for exercise are primary causes of this condition.
- **Health problems as a result of poor diet** - Because dairy cows cannot produce the desired amount of milk for human consumption while also providing nutrients to their fetuses, they are fed high-energy concentrates comprised of grains and waste from the slaughterhouse floor. Providing this highly concentrated and bizarre diet to animals that are herbivores by nature may cause potentially fatal health conditions such as rumen acidosis (excess acid in a cow's bloodstream) and milk fever (lack of calcium in a cow's bloodstream).

Bovine growth hormone - Some cows are injected with recombinant bovine growth hormone (rBGH) to increase milk production. The use of rBGH is associated with increased rates of mastitis, lameness, and reproductive problems in cows, and may be related to increased rates of reproductive cancers in humans.

Tail docking - Farmers frequently amputate cows' tails by placing a tight rubber ring around the tail until it falls off, or by cutting it with a sharp object. This practice may result in a chronic pain condition similar to phantom limb pain in humans.

"Spent" cows - Because of the intense and unnatural demands put on their bodies, dairy cows on factory farms are only milked for 3 to 4 years on average, after which time they are often so broken down and weak that they cannot stand up. At that time they are sold for slaughter. Prior the rise of factory farms, dairy cows generally produced milk for 20 years on small farms that sold milk locally.

Beef Cattle

Calves raised for beef typically begin their lives on pasture where they are free to roam and express natural behaviors. Because they are not confined in their early lives and are permitted to spend more time nursing with their mothers, they tend to have a better quality of life compared to other farm animals. However, there are many inhumane practices in the beef industry that cause cattle to suffer.

Abrupt Weaning - The majority of calves in the beef industry are weaned around 7 months of age. Nearly half are abruptly weaned the same day they are transported off the farm to auction. Natural weaning is a gradual process that is generally completed by the time a calf is between 7 to 14 months of age. If they are not separated, mothers and calves often enjoy a close relationship for many years.

Mutilations - Calves are subjected to a series of mutilations performed by untrained workers and are generally not provided any type of pain relief. Males are castrated with a scalpel, a device similar to a pair of pliers, or through the use of a tight rubber ring. They may experience infection, chronic pain, and fly larvae infestation as a result of this procedure. Their horns are removed to increase ease of handling, and they are branded with a hot iron (968 degrees Fahrenheit) to leave a permanent scar for identification purposes.

Transport- Cattle may be transported from farm to auction and feedlots for up to 28 hours without food, water, or rest. The stress of unfamiliar surroundings and a new social group, exposure to extreme temperatures and new pathogens, lack of food and water, combined with recent separation from their mothers, causes many to become sick and die.

Feedlots- For the last 3 to 4 months of their lives, thousands of cattle are crowded together where they live without protection from the elements and lie in their own waste.

Slaughter- Although the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act requires that cattle be rendered senseless to pain prior to slaughter, techniques are frequently ineffective and many are slaughtered while fully conscious.

Pigs

"Smithfield's pigs [U.S. largest pork producer] live by the hundreds of thousands in warehouse like barns, in rows of wall-to-wall pens. Sows are artificially inseminated and fed and delivered of their piglets in cages so small they cannot turn around. Forty full-grown 250-pound male hogs often occupy a pen the size of a tiny apartment. They trample each other to death. There is no sunlight, straw, fresh air or earth." - Jeff Tietz, Rolling Stone

Gestation Crates - Female pigs used for breeding, also known as sows, spend nearly their entire lives pregnant in gestation crates which are only slightly larger than the pigs themselves. They do not have enough space to walk, lie down comfortably, turn around, or even see their piglets after they are born.

Injury and Disease - Sows in gestation crates live directly above their own waste. As a result, they commonly suffer from respiratory diseases due to exposure to high levels of ammonia. Slatted flooring causes injuries to their feet and joints, and may cause them to become lame. Inactivity causes their muscles and bones to become weak. In addition, they incur skin wounds and abrasions as a result of rubbing against the bars of their crates.

Depression and Anxiety - The complete absence of opportunity for mental and physical activity and fulfillment causes sows to become so bored, agitated, and depressed that they often gnaw at the metal bars of their crates or chew with empty mouths. Others become motionless and completely unresponsive to their surroundings.

Premature weaning - When she is ready to give birth, the sow is temporarily moved from her gestation crate into a similar confining farrowing crate. Piglets nurse from under the metal bars of the crate for between 10 days to 3 weeks. Natural weaning occurs after 17 weeks.

Confinement - Piglets are moved into overcrowded pens with metal walls and concrete or slatted floors. Each pen may contain hundreds of pigs, and each building may contain many thousands of pigs. In this barren environment, pigs are prevented from expressing virtually all natural behaviors, including rooting, wallowing, nest-building, foraging, and forming social groups. In natural settings, pigs spend approximately 50% of their time engaged in foraging-related activities and may travel several kilometers per day.

Mutilations - Living in overcrowded and unnatural conditions and with no outlets for exploration, pigs may show uncharacteristic aggression by biting one another's tails. To prevent this behavior, farmers sever the tails of newborn piglets shortly after they are born. Research indicates that tail-biting could be easily prevented by providing behavioral enrichments.

Piglets are also castrated to decrease handling problems as well as to alter the taste of their meat. They have notches cut in their ears for identification purposes. Each of these procedures is performed by untrained workers and pain-relieving medications are rarely used.

Slaughter - Pigs are typically slaughtered at the age of six months when they reach market weight. Factory farm workers have reported that piglets who did not gain weight as quickly as the industry expected have been beaten to death. In natural settings, pigs may live for 10 to 12 years.

Prior to the 1960's, pigs were typically raised on small farms where they were provided access to pasture. By 1992, 30% of pigs in the United States were raised in factory farms that contained 2,000 pigs or more. By 2007, 95% of pigs were raised in such facilities.

"We must fight against the spirit of unconscious cruelty with which we treat the animals. Animals suffer as much as we do. True humanity does not allow us to impose such sufferings on them. It is our duty to make the whole world recognize it. Until we extend our circle of compassion to all living things, humanity will not find peace...We must never permit the voice of humanity within us to be silenced. It is man's sympathy with all creatures that first makes him truly a man." - Albert Schweitzer

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