

# The Suffering Of Farmed Pigs

**Most pigs in Britain are raised in crowded, dank sheds and get to taste fresh air only briefly while being shunted to and from the breeding units.**

**The life of the typical breeding female is particularly harsh and relentless. They are first impregnated when six to eight months old – increasingly via artificial insemination. As a result of selective breeding, sows now typically give birth to 10 or even more piglets, compared with four or five in the wild.**

A week before the end of the 16 and a half week pregnancy, the animals are moved into a farrowing crate, a barren structure built from metal and concrete. It is just a few inches longer and wider than the sow herself. Her newborn piglets are forced to suckle from a small area known as a "creep", adjacent to but separate from, their mother. The justification for the use of the farrowing crate is that the sow would otherwise crush her young. Recent research, however, (Farmers Weekly, Dec. 31, 1999, p16) shows that, "given the right management", piglets delivered in loose housing units suffer no more deaths than are found in farrowing crates.

After three or four weeks, mother and piglets are separated, whereas under semi-natural conditions, piglets continue suckling for up to 12.5 weeks. The separation – which causes stress to both mother and offspring – increases the speed with which the sow comes into season and thus she becomes



capable of having another litter sooner than nature intends. Anorexia is increasingly common amongst young breeding animals.

## Mutilated, Fattened And Slaughtered

The piglets are moved from the farrowing unit into concrete pens, or metal cages with perforated concrete or slatted metal floors. These newly-weaned animals, desperate for their mother's teats, often frantically try to suckle their young penmates or indulge in tail biting. The industry's "remedy" is to amputate the lower part of the tail – a painful mutilation. Many piglets also have their pointed side-teeth clipped down to the gum in the first few days of life. This is said to prevent them from lacerating either the sow's udder or the faces of their litter mates. Once again the industry ignores the real problem – namely, the piglets are being forced to compete for teats in an unyielding metal and stone environment with an unnaturally large number of litter mates.

After about six weeks, the young pigs are moved to similarly unsuitable rearing pens for final fattening on a high protein diet. An estimated 15 per cent suffer painful leg and joint problems. This is caused partly by standing on hard floors, but also because they're bred to grow unnaturally fast, and are unable to support their own weight. Heart and respiratory problems are also endemic.

After four to seven months, pigs not selected for breeding purposes are sent for slaughter. Some die during transit due to stress caused by overcrowding, long journeys, rough handling, extremes of temperature.





### From Farrowing Unit To Sausage Meat

The mother, meanwhile, following the removal of her piglets, is returned to a small group pen with other weaned sows – ready to be re-impregnated within a matter of days. The strain placed upon sows is visible in health problems that are common in the breeding herd. These include brittle bones and leg deformities, resulting in lameness, which in turn leads to an inability to “posture” properly for mating. This is an important reason for the trend towards artificial insemination. After three or four years of relentless exploitation, breeding females – as well as stud boars – are “spent” and ready for slaughter. They will usually be turned into pie and sausage meat.

### Slaughter

Roughly 9 million pigs are slaughtered in British killing plants every year, and around 30,000 are exported to Europe and further afield for killing. Around the same figure are also exported for breeding.

Current EU rules allow pigs to travel for 24 hours. Throughout the 24 hours they must have continuous access to water. If the destination can be reached within another 2 hours then they may go a full 26 hours. After a journey of 24 hours the pigs must be unloaded, given food and water and rested for 24 hours. Another 24 hour journey can then be repeated and this pattern can be repeated infinitely.

At the end of March (2004), the European Parliament voted to impose a 9 hour maximum overall journey limit for animals travelling to slaughter. Before this can become law the measure requires the approval of the Commission and the Agricultural Council of Ministers. A final decision has been deferred until 2011.

While a maximum journey length of 9 hours will be a considerable improvement on current legislation, it is still a long time to be spent in a confined space with no room to turn around or lie down. Pigs do not travel well; a significant number die from heat exhaustion, heart attacks or suffocation.

In the killing factories, pigs are first “stunned” with electric tongs applied to the head, the intention being to render them unconscious. They are then shackled by a back leg and hoisted upside down. Their throats are cut (“sticking”), severing the main blood vessels in the neck. Slaughterhouses commonly employ staff on a piecework basis; their earnings are directly related to the number of animals killed and cut-up (“dressed”). As a consequence, welfare regulations such as the need to ensure adequate stunning are frequently flouted.

### Incompetence And Greed

A three-year study of 29 slaughterhouses in the UK revealed that stunning is often ineffective. Thirty six per cent of the pigs were found to have been stunned in the wrong position, and an average of 30 seconds elapsed between stunning and sticking. As a result, 15.6 per cent of the pigs had to be re-stunned, and 20.5 per cent were found to have recovered by the time they went to the knife. (Anil and McKinstry ‘Summarised Results of a Survey of Pig Abattoirs in England and Wales’, August 1993).

### Outside Units

It is estimated that around 30 per cent of breeding sows in the UK are now kept outside. Their offspring, however, will usually be reared in intensive units. The majority of offspring, however, are still fattened intensively inside sheds. Equally, outdoor production is often introduced as a cost saving rather than a welfare measure. Modern intensive breeds cannot cope with extreme weather conditions - whether too much rain, snow or sun. They suffer a high incidence of heat stress, respiratory and other diseases, as well as lameness due to the often boggy ground.

