

## **FACTS ABOUT OUR FOOD**

### **~ Market Pigs ~**

#### **Overview**

Canada raises more than 21 million pigs a year for domestic slaughter, plus many millions more that are exported to countries like the U.S. The vast majority of these animals are raised on factory farms, where they live in crowded, barren pens inside large barns with no windows and cement/metal-slatted floors. In these facilities, the animals are deprived of almost all their natural behaviours.

Farm Sanctuary



**Market pigs in cramped pens on a factory farm**

#### **About market pigs**

There are two types of pigs farmed in Canada: “market pigs”, which are raised for meat; and breeding sows and boars, which are used to produce piglets. Sows are confined for most of their lives in tiny 2’ x 7’ cages called gestation crates or sow stalls, which are considered by many animal experts to be one of the worst forms of institutionalized abuse in the world. See our [sow stall fact sheet](#) for more information on breeding sows.

At two to three weeks of age, piglets are removed from their mothers and placed in weaner pens. At about 12 weeks, they’re moved to grower pens, and, for the last few weeks of their lives, to finisher pens. They’re slaughtered at about 250 pounds, or 6 months of age; they naturally would live 12 – 15 years.

#### **Antibiotics and other drugs**

Pigs in Canada are routinely given antibiotics as growth-promotants and to prevent sickness in the crowded, dirty and stressful conditions typical of factory farms, which make them vulnerable to illness. Use of these drugs contributes to antibiotic resistance in the community — a serious issue in human and animal medicine.

Perhaps the most controversial drug they receive is Ractopamine (also called “Paylean”), which is given a couple of weeks before pigs are sent to slaughter in order to increase weight gain and leanness. The drug has been banned in many countries around the world, including Russia, mainland China, Taiwan, and the entire European Union; however, it is still used in Canada and the U.S. It has caused restlessness, tremors, vomiting and death in animals, and when tested on humans prior to its release, has shown to induce severe anxiety-like symptoms. It is a serious welfare issue because it makes pigs more anxious and vulnerable to heart attack, especially during transport. It also leaves residue in meat, albeit at levels deemed acceptable by the Canadian government.

#### **Surgical procedures**

Shortly after birth, young piglets undergo a series of painful procedures, all without anaesthetic:

- Their teeth are clipped to prevent biting the sow’s udder and biting each other, which would damage and lower the value of their meat.
- Their tails are cut off to prevent them from being bitten or “suckled” by other pigs — an aberrant behavior which is the result of being weaned too soon (in the 1950s, piglets were commonly weaned at eight weeks; today they typically are weaned around 20 days, and in some cases as early as 10).
- The males are castrated to prevent “boar taint”, which can cause the meat to have an odour and taste. (Research has shown that only about 3% of male pigs actually develop boar taint, and it’s even more unlikely in young pigs slaughtered at six months.)

### Transport

Pigs in Canada may be legally transported up to 36 hours without food, water or rest — this is in addition to a 5-hour-or-more food withdrawal period prior to loading. (By comparison, the maximum travel time without rest in the U.S. is 28 hours, and in the EU, trips longer than 8 hours require trucks to have special ventilation and temperature-monitoring equipment.) Transportation is especially hard on pigs for several reasons: they are generally prone to stress; they experience travel sickness; in summer they are susceptible to heat stroke because they don't sweat (they don't have sweat glands); and in winter, without heavy fur, they often freeze to the sides of the open, unheated trucks.



Twyla Francois

Pigs that have died from overheating in transport

### Slaughter

Upon arrival at the slaughter plant, pigs are unloaded; those on the top levels of the trucks must descend steep ramps, a frightening process for the already stressed animals. At the plant, they are held for an additional period that typically is about three hours but may be up to 24. It's called "lairage", and it allows the animals to calm down, as higher stress levels diminish the quality of the meat. At slaughter time, the pigs are moved through a tight chute and workers stun them using one of three methods: electricity (prongs placed behind the ears of the animal that send an electric current through the head); gassing by carbon dioxide (groups of pigs are enclosed in a CO2 chamber); or captive bolt (a retractable metal rod that fires from a gun into the pig's head and retracts again). All three methods are intended to render the animal unconscious, at which point the pig is hoisted up by a back leg and the throat slit for bleeding out ("exsanguination"). The pig then moves on to the scalding tank (approximately 60°C/140°F), which is intended primarily to remove the hair before butchering begins. However, given that a large slaughter plant will kill several thousand pigs per day, and that processing speeds are fast, there is the risk of, and are reports of, animals not being fully bled and being dumped into scalding tanks still alive.

### Smarter than a 3-year-old

Research has shown pigs to be the fourth-smartest non-human animal, surpassed only by primates, dolphins and elephants. Intelligent and inquisitive, pigs wag their tails when happy and have excellent memories (they can learn their names and come when called at 2 to 3 weeks of age). Adult pigs have demonstrated cognitive abilities superior to those of a three-year-old child.



Lynn Kavanagh, CCFA

Ideal housing for pigs: open pens with deep straw

### Havoc on the environment

Intensive pig operations produce huge volumes of waste. A large factory farm holding several thousand pigs, for example, can produce more waste than a city of 100,000 people. The waste is held in "lagoons", and often is sprayed on nearby farmland to dispose of it. Aside from the strong stench, the waste causes respiratory problems such as asthma in local residents, and pollutes water in nearby lakes and rivers.

### The barn environment

Inside the barns, meanwhile, despite ventilation, the high concentration of waste and ammonia causes respiratory problems both in workers and in the pigs themselves. The workers wear masks to try to combat it; the pigs cannot, and live in it 24 hours a day.

### What you can do

- Contact government officials and business leaders to let them know that a) factory farming is unacceptable and that b) you will not purchase pig meat from factory farmed animals. Contact names are available on our [Take Action page](#).
- Don't eat pigs.

### **For more information, please contact us:**

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