

Compassion in World Farming Factsheets

Turkeys

Background

Worldwide, over 600 million turkeys are slaughtered for meat annually. More than 40% of these are in the USA, over 200 million in the EU27 and around 15 million in the UK. Over 70% of turkeys globally are raised in industrial farming systems, including the large majority in the UK, Europe and the USA.

Intensive rearing of turkeys

Like meat chickens, turkeys have been bred to grow very quickly. Turkeys are typically reared in windowless, barren sheds containing up to tens of thousands of birds. The floor of the shed is covered with litter (woodshavings or similar material) which becomes wet and dirty with the birds' waste and releases ammonia. So many turkeys are crammed into each shed that as they grow the floor of the shed can hardly be seen. Usually the shed is not open to the air and is fan-ventilated and artificially lit, so the birds have no access to daylight and fresh air. The lighting level is kept low but is often kept on most of the time. Turkeys are normally slaughtered at between 9 and 24 weeks of age.

Welfare Issues

There are very serious welfare issues in the breeding and intensive rearing of turkeys:

Breeding

Selective breeding of turkeys for faster growth rate and a higher proportion of white breast meat has resulted in serious welfare problems. Scientific studies have shown that fast-growing turkeys have higher rates of lameness and heart disease compared to slower-growing breeds. Lameness is a serious welfare issue in turkeys and heart disease is responsible for a major proportion of flock mortality.

Painful degeneration of the hips and other joints is common in male breeding turkeys. Male turkeys are now too heavy and broad breasted to mate naturally without risking injury to the female. Artificial insemination is therefore standard practice. Male breeding turkeys must undergo the repeated stress of being 'milked' for semen collection, whilst females endure the process of catching and insemination.

The turkeys used for breeding are required to reach maturity in good health and fertility. Because fast growth would damage their health, their food intake is usually severely restricted during their growing period, making them stressed, frustrated and chronically hungry.

Temperature, air and litter quality

Turkeys confined in sheds cannot change their environment to avoid heat, cold or dirty areas as they could in natural conditions. The litter is often not cleaned out during the lifetime of the birds and becomes increasingly wet and dirty. As a result, almost all the birds develop sores on their feet, which progress to severe ulcers in a significant proportion of the birds. Research suggests that it is impossible to rear turkeys at high commercial stocking densities in current rearing systems without a high proportion of the flock developing these sores. Sores can also develop on the hocks and breast.

The air normally becomes highly polluted with ammonia from the birds' waste. Ammonia gas can be damaging to the birds' eyes and respiratory systems. Fast-growing turkeys can easily become heat-stressed and often pant, a sign of thermal discomfort. If ventilation is inadequate in hot weather, thousands of birds can die from the heat.

Light levels and beak trimming

Light levels are generally kept low to minimise problems with aggression, feather pecking and cannibalism. The lights may be kept on for most of the 24 hours in order to encourage the birds to keep eating. Both dimly lit conditions and prolonged lighting can damage the eyes of turkeys and, in the worst cases, can even lead to blindness. Some smaller scale seasonal producers rear turkeys in pole barns. These have natural lighting and ventilation and the stocking density is usually a little lower than in closed sheds. However, the birds are usually beak-trimmed to reduce problems with aggression and cannibalism. This painful mutilation involves removing part of the beak using a hot blade, secateurs or an infra-red beam.

Overcrowding

The crowding of turkeys in barren sheds means that they have little opportunity for natural foraging and investigatory behaviour. They lack exercise, are disturbed or trodden on when they are resting, have increasingly little space to move as they grow larger and may find it more difficult to reach food and drink if they are lame. Typical stocking densities in Europe can be up to a massive 60kg/m². High stocking densities contribute to reduced air quality and increased risk of cannibalism, leg problems and foot sores.

Catching, transport and slaughter

Turkeys from large scale production are generally slaughtered off-farm in large commercial slaughterhouses. A high proportion of turkeys can be injured during catching and transport from the farm to the slaughterhouse; the most common injury is bruising but wings and legs may be broken by rough handling and poor transport.

At the slaughterhouse, the turkeys are typically hung upside down by their legs from shackles, which are on a moving line. This carries them to an electrically charged stunning waterbath, through which their heads are dragged. The purpose of stunning is to make the birds unconscious and thus insensible to pain before their necks are cut. After neck cutting the birds are placed in the scalding tank, which is designed to loosen their feathers to ease plucking.

Shackling is extremely painful and distressing for the birds, especially for large turkeys because their legs will have to be compressed more to fit into the slots of the shackle and the pressure applied on the leg bones increases with the weight of the bird. The pain experienced during shackling is likely to be worse in birds suffering from painful lameness due to diseases or abnormalities of the leg joints or bones and in birds suffering from joint dislocation or bone fractures caused by rough handling during catching, crating and uncrating.

Inevitably, the pain and distress caused by shackling results in severe wing flapping, which can cause dislocated joints and broken bones. Painful pre-stun shocks can occur when the birds' wings make contact with the water bath before their heads are fully immersed. Turkeys' wings, owing to the wingspan, hang lower than their heads when shackled. One survey of turkey processing plants revealed that 80% of the turkeys received pre-stun electric shocks under commercial conditions.

Pre-stun shocks can cause further wing flapping and, consequently, the birds may miss the electrified water bath completely or partially, leading to total failure or inadequate stunning. EU

law only requires severing of one of the two carotid arteries (the main blood vessels supplying the brain). The risks of inadequate stunning and inadequate neck cutting mean that some birds may still be alive and conscious when they enter the scalding tank.

In small scale seasonal turkey production, turkeys may be slaughtered on-farm in small seasonal slaughtering facilities. In such facilities, turkeys may be killed by having their necks dislocated, which does not necessarily cause immediate unconsciousness. If turkeys are plucked immediately after neck dislocation they may still be alive and conscious when being plucked. Compassion in World Farming investigations have also uncovered turkeys in seasonal slaughtering facilities in the UK being killed by neck cutting without first being stunned. This is inhumane and against the law, which requires turkeys to be stunned before neck cutting.

Higher welfare alternatives

There are much better alternative methods of rearing turkeys:

Extensive indoor

Extensive indoor rearing uses lower stocking densities and environmental enrichment is usually provided. For example, in the UK the RSPCA's *Freedom Food* standards for turkeys stipulate higher light levels, a maximum stocking density of 25kg/m² and the provision of enrichment such as straw bales, perches, hanging lengths of rope and other objects for pecking. Enrichment has been demonstrated to significantly reduce harmful pecking.

Free range

Many smaller scale seasonal producers rear turkeys with access to free range. Free range turkeys are usually slower-growing breeds which suffer less from the heart problems and lameness associated with fast-growing breeds. In the EU, the maximum stocking density inside the shed is limited to 25kg/m² and in addition there must be an area of at least 4m² per bird on the outdoor range.

Organic

Organically reared turkeys are also usually slower-growing breeds and must have access to an outdoor run. In the EU, the maximum flock size is limited to 2500 birds per shed, the maximum stocking density inside the shed is limited to 21kg/m² and in addition there must be an area of at least 10m² per bird on the outdoor range. Beak trimming is discouraged in organic systems.

Alternatives to the shackling of turkeys for slaughter

Gas killing has the important advantage of avoiding the pain and distress caused by handling during unloading from the transport crates and shackling. However, inhalation of carbon dioxide at high concentrations has been found to be aversive to turkeys and causes severe respiratory distress before loss of consciousness.

Compassion in World Farming believes that electrical stunning should be replaced with gas killing provided that only non-aversive (inert) gas mixtures are used. We believe that argon and/or nitrogen with a maximum of 2% residual oxygen should be used. Some turkey slaughterhouses in the UK and Europe already use this mixture so it is clearly commercially viable to do so.

Recommendations

You can help to improve the welfare of turkeys in a number of ways:

- Join Compassion in World Farming's campaigns or donate to our work at www.ciwf.org

- Download the compassionate shopping guide at www.ciwf.org.uk/supermarkets
- Contact your local grocery shop and the retail chains to ask them to stock a higher proportion of turkey from birds kept in alternative systems (extensive indoor, free range and organic);
- Avoid buying turkey that has been intensively reared, as the birds are likely to have suffered during their lives;
- Only buy turkey that has a label that guarantees either extensive indoor, free-range or organic production – note that standard industry assurance schemes, such as Quality British Turkey (Red Tractor logo) in the UK, do not guarantee extensive or free-range production and allow high stocking densities for intensively reared turkeys;
- When buying ready meals or processed turkey meat, check the ingredients list to make sure that only free-range or extensively reared turkeys have been used – ask a member of staff if you need more information about how the birds were reared;
- Ask in restaurants whether the turkey used in their dishes is reared in extensive or free-range conditions;
- For the UK, you can find out more on the turkey sold in the major supermarkets from Compassion in World Farming's supermarket survey at www.ciwf.org.uk/supermarkets

Sources and further reading

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