

Behind The Scenes: The Truth About Pork and Beef

E-I-E-I-O! When I was young, I used to imagine the meat on my plate came from somewhere like *Old Macdonald's Farm*. But as I grew older, I learned that most of our meat comes from factory farming and the idyllic image of animals grazing in fields is mostly an image from the past. Now I understand the modern-day truth behind that medium-rare steak or crispy bacon, and choose to fill my plate instead with potatoes and peas.

According to Earthsave Canada, factory farming is an industrial process that applies the philosophy and practices of mass production to animal farming. In excess of one million animals are slaughtered every hour in the United States alone. That's more than ten billion a year!

Meat consumption has increased 500% since 1950. In Canada, we consume 160 pounds per capita annually. In the U.S. it's even worse, at 200 pounds per person per year.

"The profit motive, aided by government subsidies and price supports, drives the industry," explains Tom Regan, author of *Empty Cages*. "Factory farming requires that animals are removed from the land and raised inside closed doors. Farmers must do whatever is necessary to bring the animals to market in the shortest possible time. Those farmers who fail the test fail in the marketplace of commercial animal agriculture."

Here's how this looks for cows raised on factory farms:

According to *Why Animals Matter* (2007, Williams & Demello), 83.5% of beef cattle in the U.S. are in the hands of four huge corporations, including the giant, Cargill. With this monopoly, and little competition, the animals are rushed through a traumatic and painful life with extremely little consideration placed on their well-being.

Most beef cattle spend the last six months of their lives in feedlots of up to 40,000 animals. In feedlots without good runoff they stand in piles of manure. They are commonly fed growth hormones and unnaturally rich diets to rapidly increase their weight gain. In many cases this leads to growth or digestive disorders, pain, lameness, infection, and disease. Growth hormones, banned in the European Union since 1988, may also be linked to human health issues. According to Health Canada, there are six hormonal growth promoters approved in Canada for use in beef cattle.

A standard beef slaughterhouse in the United States kills roughly 250 animals every hour. The high speed of the assembly line makes it extremely difficult to treat animals in a humane manner and ensure they are stunned before they meet the blade. As a result, conscious animals are frequently hung upside down, kicking and struggling, as they endure the pain. This environment is also highly dangerous for the human workers involved.

As for veal, veal calves commonly live for eighteen to twenty weeks in wooden crates so small that the animals cannot move or even lie down comfortably. They are fed an all-liquid, iron- and fibre-deficient diet that induces anemia, along with other health problems, and results in a light-colored, greatly prized flesh.

And life for pigs isn't much better. If anything, it's worse. They have become, like many other non-human animals, inanimate objects, valued for their body parts rather than the intelligent, highly social animals they are.

As piglets, their tails are often cut off to minimize tail-biting, notches are taken out of their ears for identification, and males are castrated, all without anesthesia. By three weeks of age, 15 % of the original babies will have died. The unlucky survivors are crowded into pens with metal bars and concrete floors where they remain until they reach their slaughter weight at 6 months of age. Dust, dander and ammonia fill the air and most hogs suffer from respiratory disease. Regan reports that an estimated 70% have pneumonia at slaughter.

Modern breeding sows are treated like piglet-making machines, forced to produce upwards of 20 piglets each year. After being impregnated, the sows are chained in a 2' x 6' steel-barred

‘gestation crate’ with no straw or bedding provided for the duration of their 16-week pregnancy. With no ability for the sow to even turn or move forward or backward the system does not even meet the basic needs of an animal to sleep and defecate in separate areas.

As Regan says about factory farm animals, “...what we see is their lives observed from the outside. Viewed inwardly, in their present circumstances, they are tragic, pathetic shadows of their more robust ancestors.”

According to the Canadian Coalition for Farm Animals, factory farming in Canada is much the same as it is in the U.S. “The underlying motive is profits, not animal welfare.”

On top of that, the use of antibiotics, antivirals and other antimicrobials for livestock is raising concerns about the potential risk of transmission to humans and the development of antibiotic resistance. According to the Health Canada website, in Canada, approved drugs have been tested to ensure that the amount of residue that could remain in the tissue or food product is safe. However, though presently under review, “Current legislation prohibits the importation of unapproved drugs for sale in Canada, but does not prohibit veterinarians or producers from importing unapproved veterinary drugs for "personal use" that is, to treat their own animals. . . . Therefore, food from animals treated with unapproved drugs could contain potentially harmful and violative levels of residues, which could result in short or long-term health effects for those eating that food.”

So as you dig into that medium-rare steak or crispy bacon, think about the quality of what you might be eating, and its possible negative affects on your health. Both of our local supermarkets do carry beef from cattle that have not been given antibiotics or grown hormones – at Thrifty’s, Alex Campbell Signature Series from Cargill, and at GVM, from Spring Creek Ranch.

And also think about the animals, and all the pain they have endured just to end up on your dinner plate. Try to cut down or cut out your meat consumption or at least eat local, free-range meat. Not all large, industrialized agriculture operations are as bad as described above, while others may be worse. Do your own research into where your meat comes from.

Maybe potatoes and peas don’t look so bad after all.

Kelsey Mech, October 2008