FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
Home Slaughter & Processing

Released: 5/18/2020

CAN I SLAUGHTER AND PROCESS MY OWN ANIMALS AT HOME?

Yes. A "Producers Exemption" is included in the Meat and Poultry Inspection Act. It exempts you from the requirements for inspection when slaughtering your own animal, on your own property, for consumption in your household. The producer/owner must own the animal for 30 days prior to slaughter. The producer/owner must also consume the meat themselves. They may not sell this meat to others.

HOW DO I SELL MEAT AND/OR POULTRY PRODUCTS TO THE PUBLIC?

To offer that meat for sale, animals must be slaughtered and processed in a licensed facility under inspection by the Illinois State Department of Agriculture or by the USDA. This inspection provides the consumer assurance that meat is safe to eat. Meat and/or poultry products that are sold must be prepared from meat that originated from an "approved source." Evidence that a meat or poultry product comes from an approved source is the presence of a state (in the shape of Illinois) or federal (circle) mark of inspection on the product.

CAN ANYONE PERFORM HOME SLAUGHTER?

While technically yes, it is strongly recommended a highly trained and skilled person lead this task. Ideally, this task would only be undertaken in the home setting by an experienced person with specific training in this line of work and a full understanding of humane animal handling and stunning practices, sanitary dressing procedures, as well as processing into primal, subprimal, and retail cuts.

HOW CAN I HANDLE & STUN LIVESTOCK HUMANELY?

Ensuring animals are rendered insensible to pain prior to slaughter through stunning or enacting the mode-of-death efficiently and quickly is important. The American Veterinary Medical Association's Guidelines for Humane Slaughter include important considerations and methods, including the use of firearms: www.avma.org/sites/default/files/resources/Humane-Slaughter-Guidelines.pdf

WHAT RISKS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH HOME SLAUGHTER AND BUTCHERY?

Without proper training, setup, equipment, and facilities, personal safety and food safety risks may outweigh the benefits of home slaughter. Outdoor processing can pose food safety hazards resulting from temperature abuse and cross contamination. Improper slaughter procedures and inadequate sanitation can, and will, pose food-safety risks resulting in illness, or even death. Without sufficient experience and personal protective equipment, such as the use of a cutting glove on your non-cutting hand as well as belly and wrist shields, home slaughter practices can result in severe injury.

WHAT WOULD INDICATE AN ANIMAL/CARCASS IS NOT SAFE TO PROCESS?

Does the animal appear healthy? In general, be on the lookout for animals that are:

Livestock meeting any of the above criteria should not be slaughtered and would be condemned in an inspected slaughter plant.

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WHAT SHOULD I CONSIDER TO PREVENT ILLNESS?

Prior to beginning the slaughter process, it is important to remember the 3 C's: cold, covered, and clean.

Cold

- Weather should be factored into decisions to conduct home slaughter. It is important to conduct dressing procedures during the coolest part of the day with adequate visibility. Bacteria grow and multiply easily above 40°F. Accordingly, home slaughter should only take place when the outside temperature is below 40°F.
- Prepare adequate freezer space ahead of time. The slaughter and fabrication process will generate a large amount of product you will need to be prepared to chill. On average, a 280 lb. pig will generate 135 -155 lb of bone-in cuts or 95 – 115 lb of boneless cuts. A 1,200 lb steer can generate 400 – 500 lb of retail cuts. The sooner you can package and freeze products, the less the potential for risk. Due to the time required to chill larger cuts, freezing is a safer choice than refrigerating.

Covered

- Minimizing exposure of the carcass to external pests and packaging quickly after slaughter will reduce risk of contamination.

Clean

- Knives and handsaws should be washed frequently, preferably between strokes and especially when moving from external cutting (skin or hide) to internal (muscle, bone, fat). This will help reduce cross contamination (harvest and processing).
- The use of clean, potable water as a well a pressured hose to wash carcasses, tools and equipment is crucial. Carcasses should be rinsed starting from the top and working downward. Boiling water is recommended for sanitizing knives during the slaughter process.
- Soap should be used to wash equipment, tools, and hands. Wash hands and forearms frequently, in between steps, to minimize cross contamination. Dishwashing soap is preferred for its ability to cut through grease and fat.
- Aprons made of plastic or rubber may help prevent cross- contamination between clothing and carcasses. However, this only reduces cross-contamination risks if aprons are washed frequently during the slaughter process.
- Any tables used should be made of a nonporous material for ease of cleaning. A hat or baseball cap will also help to reduce hair contamination.

WHAT THINGS SHOULD I LOOK FOR WHILE SLAUGHTERING LIVESTOCK?

It is important to look for obvious signs of disease on the head, organs in the body cavity, and the carcass during slaughter. If any signs of disease are observed, it is preferable that the carcass is not used for human consumption, however a veterinarian may also be able to examine the carcass to ensure safety for consumption. Having a local veterinarian on site during the slaughter process is highly recommended.

An online resource providing detailed information on the process of inspection and disease presentations is available through the Food and Agriculture Organization: www.fao.org/3/t0756e/T0756E00.htm.

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Carcasses need to be closely inspected for three major contaminants: fecal material, digestive contents, and milk.

If observed, any meat or fat in contact with these contaminants needs to be cut away and disposed. These contaminants may harbor pathogenic bacteria that pose serious food safety risks. After skinning, removal of internal organs, and rinsing with water, it is recommended that the carcass be thoroughly sprayed with a vinegar solution with a clean garden sprayer, to reduce bacterial growth. This vinegar solution can be made by diluting commercial vinegar (5% acetic acid) by half with water for a final solution of 2.5% acetic acid.

WHAT BACTERIA SHOULD I BE WORRIED ABOUT?

Escherichia coli (E. coli) - E. coli bacteria normally lives in the intestines of people and animals. Although most E. coli are harmless, some can cause illnesses such as diarrhea or illnesses outside of the intestinal tract. E coli O157:H7 is a common pathogen found in fecal material. Someone having consumed E. coli O157:H7 runs a risk of developing hemolytic uremic syndrome, a potentially life-threatening complication that could lead to permanent kidney damage or death.

Salmonella - Most people with Salmonella infection suffer from diarrhea, fever, and stomach cramps. Symptoms usually begin six hours to six days after infection and last four to seven days. However, some people do not develop symptoms until several weeks after infection. In rare cases, Salmonella strains can cause infection in urine, blood, bones, joints, or the nervous system (spinal fluid and brain).

Campylobacter - Campylobacter infection is caused by Campylobacter bacteria. It is the most common bacterial cause of diarrheal illness in the U.S. Symptoms usually include diarrhea (often bloody), fever, and stomach cramps and possibly nausea and vomiting. Symptoms usually start two to five days after infection and last about one week. Some people experience complications, such as irritable bowel syndrome, temporary paralysis, and arthritis. Campylobacter can be carried in the intestines, liver, and other organs of animals and transferred when an animal is slaughtered.

WHO IS MOST AT RISK FOR FOOD-BORNE ILLNESS?

- People with a weakened immune system
- Adults older than 50, especially with medical issues
- Infants (children younger than 12 months)
- Pregnant women

WHO DO I GO TO WITH QUESTIONS?

- Illinois Department of Agriculture
- Your local veterinarian
- Your county health department

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DISCLAIMER: This information is intended to inform those thinking about, or engaged, in processing animals on the farm. The information provided is intended to present the importance of food safety and associated risks. It is not intended to explain the process of dressing procedures, nor promote this activity. Meat processing is complicated, it should not be taken lightly. Person(s) involved should understand that carelessness is not an option with food safety.

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SOURCES: American Veterinary Medical Association, www.avma.org/sites/default/files/resources/Humane-Slaughter-Guidelines.pdf; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov; Food and Animal Organization www.fao.org/3/t0756e/T0756E00.htIllinois Department of Agriculture www2.illinois.gov/sites/agr/Animals/meat-inspection/Pages/Faq-Resources.aspx#h6