

# Briefing: Non-stun religious slaughter of animals



*The National Secular Society (NSS) is a non-profit organisation campaigning for the separation of religion and state, and equal respect for everyone's human rights so that no one is either advantaged or disadvantaged on account of their beliefs. We regard secularism and freedom of expression as essential features of a liberal democracy.*

## What is religious (non-stun) slaughter?

- **Animal welfare legislation requires all animals to be stunned before slaughter in order to minimise suffering.** The only exemption is for religious communities to meet Jewish and Muslim religious dietary preferences.
- The Jewish method of slaughter, *shechita*, does not permit stunning as Jewish religious tradition dictates animals intended for food must be healthy and uninjured at the time of slaughter.
- Islamic dietary rules for halal meat can be satisfied with animals stunned before slaughter if animals do not die as a result of the stun. However, there is no definitive consensus and slaughter without pre-stunning does also take place.

## Is slaughter without pre-stunning cruel?

- The scientific consensus is clear that it is more humane to stun an animal prior to slaughter than not to do so. The slaughter of animals without pre-stunning is permitted in the UK despite a recommendation by the Government's own advisory body, the **Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC)**, that the practice should be banned. The FAWC have concluded that animals slaughtered without pre-stunning are likely to experience "very significant pain and distress" before they become unconscious.
- The **EU's Scientific Panel on Animal Health and Welfare (AHAW)** have stated that: "Due to the serious animal welfare concerns associated with slaughter without stunning, pre-cut stunning should always be performed."
- The **Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE)** have stated: "FVE is of the opinion that the practice of slaughtering animals without prior stunning is unacceptable under any circumstances"
- **RSPCA, Compassion in World Farming** and the **British Veterinary Association** all support an end to non-stun slaughter to improve animal welfare at the time of death.

## How common is non-stun slaughter?

- Recent data from the Food Standards Agency has revealed a sharp rise in the number of animals slaughtered without pre-stunning over the last four years.
- In 2013, just 15% of sheep and goats were not pre-stunned, but this rose to **almost a quarter (24.4%)** of all slaughters between April and June 2017. The number of chickens slaughtered without pre-stunning has soared from 3% in 2013 to **18.5%**. One percent of cattle did not receive a pre-slaughter stun. **In total, only 81.5% of animals were stunned prior to slaughter in 2017.**

## Does the NSS support a ban on non-stun slaughter?

Yes. Whilst we support the right to religious freedom, we do not think that exemptions should be made on religious grounds to animal welfare regulations which apply without exception to everyone else.

## Do any countries prohibit non-stun slaughter?

Yes. Slaughter without pre-stunning is banned in the following countries:

**Austria • Australia • Belgium (Flanders region) • Denmark • Estonia • Finland • Greece • Iceland • Latvia • Liechtenstein • New Zealand • Norway • Slovakia • Slovenia • Sweden • Switzerland (except poultry)**

## Don't religious groups have the right to freedom of religion and the right to manifest religion or belief?

- Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights does provide for a right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion which includes the freedom to manifest a religion or belief in practice and observance.
- However, this aspect of Article 9 is a **qualified right**, which means that an interference with the right can be justified in certain circumstances. We maintain that the welfare of animals provides such a justification.

## Who certifies non-stun slaughtered meat?

- Various organisations certify religiously-slaughtered meat. Some are registered charities, including London Board for Shechita and Halal Monitoring Committee (HMC).
- HMC has been criticised by some halal suppliers by putting them under pressure by pushing the message that only non-stunned meat is “genuinely Halal”. Because halal suppliers fear losing the trust of their customers, they can feel forced to switch to unstunned halal meat and pay thousands of pounds for HMC certification.
- One experienced halal trader stated in a 2011 BBC interview that HMC are “really hammering the halal industry” and that “they’re nothing but a scam.”

## Is opposition to non-stun slaughter discriminatory?

- Advocates of religious slaughter often accuse its detractors of anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim bigotry in an attempt to shut down all argument. Our opposition to slaughter without pre-stunning has nothing to do with religious prejudice.
- Many Muslims and Jews support pre-stun slaughter on animal welfare grounds. **The majority of animals slaughtered for halal meat are stunned first.** Figures from the Food Standards Agency say that in 2012 of those animals slaughtered in the UK according to halal rules, 84% of cattle or calves, 81% of sheep and goats, and 88% of poultry were stunned before slaughter.
- Some halal brands make a conscious choice to only use meat from stunned animals due to animal welfare concerns. For example, halal supplier Najma states on its website: “We follow the Islamic values of treating all animals with kindness and compassion. To ensure the welfare of the animals, we do use recoverable stunning prior to slaughter.”
- Our objection to non-stun slaughter is based on upholding the important principle of 'one law for all' and ensuring that animals do not suffer unnecessarily and become the victims of religious privilege.

## Can't those who oppose slaughter without pre-stunning simply avoid eating such meat?

- Unfortunately not. There is no requirement under UK or EU law for the meat from animals slaughtered without stunning to be labelled as such. **As a result, non-stun slaughtered meat is routinely being sold on the general market to unwitting members of the public.**
- Some parts of animals killed by Jewish ritual slaughter methods are not themselves regarded as kosher, and are therefore sold on the general market unlabelled.
- Some Sikhs, Christians and Hindus believe that they must not consume meat slaughtered according to Muslim or Jewish rights. The prevalence of meat slaughtered by Jewish and Muslim methods without labelling impedes their own religious freedom.
- An investigation by NSS in 2018 revealed that that **around one in 12 councils provide non-stunned halal meat for school meals**, reaching thousands of children across Britain. In many of these schools, there is no separate meat option for children who do not want to eat non-stunned meat. They must have a vegetarian meal instead.
- A November 2018 investigation by The Times found that in several cases, schools providing only non-stunned halal meat were not informing parents of the nature of the meat and how it was slaughtered.
- As long as religious groups retain the privilege of an exemption from legislation that permits slaughter without pre-stunning, we maintain it is only fair that consumers have the right to information that enables them to avoid such products if they so wish.