

Technical Note No 15

Poultry catching and handling

Summary

The consumption of poultry in the UK has increased steadily over recent years and the total number of broiler chickens slaughtered annually is now approximately 950 million. In addition, 50 million end-of-lay hens, 18 million turkeys and 20 million ducks are slaughtered. The slaughter process begins when poultry are caught and handled on the farm, for transportation to the slaughterhouse.

Rough, aggressive catching can result in poultry panicking, becoming distressed and injured. Bone breaks, joint dislocations and bruising can be common and result in birds suffering, carcass downgrading and financial loss. Handling birds with care and consideration can reduce these problems.

This leaflet focuses on humane methods for the manual capture and handling of broilers and end-of-lay chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, guinea fowl and quail. It aims to provide constructive, practical advice to maximise bird welfare and meat quality.

All staff involved in the catching and handling of poultry must be trained appropriately and be made aware that they have an obligation to ensure the safety of the animals during loading for transport, and that the mistreatment of birds will not be tolerated.

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Legislation

Some areas and countries of the world have instated legislation to protect the welfare of animals during slaughter and killing. For example, in Europe the key legislation is *Council Regulation (EC) No. 1099/2009 on the protection of animals at the time of killing*. The major provision of the European regulation is that **animals shall be spared any avoidable pain, distress or suffering during their killing and related operations (eg handling, lairage, restraint, stunning and bleeding)**. Around the world, there may be variation between the legal requirements of some areas or countries. It is therefore critical that readers of this Technical Note are aware of all the rules in their country of operation, and any country to which they export products.

Pre-catching preparation

- The vehicle driver should be trained and competent to transport birds and must be aware of his/her responsibility to protect the welfare of the birds. This must include knowledge of what to do in different weather conditions (eg hot/cold), in an emergency or in the case of a breakdown.
- The catching team must have received training in animal welfare and correct bird handling techniques. Inexperienced catchers must be allocated an experienced mentor who will closely supervise the trainee during catching of live birds.
- The catching team supervisor must advise the catching team how many birds should be loaded per container, which will be dependent on the weather that day. Birds should be stocked at a density that allows them to rest and to turn around if they wish.
- The catching team must be easily contactable by staff at the slaughterhouse to ensure catching only begins (or continues) if the slaughter equipment is fully functioning and enough space is available in the slaughterhouse lairage for the number of birds being caught.
- Feed should be withdrawn for no longer than 12 hours prior to slaughter, with the timing of this planned in consultation with the person who schedules processing at the slaughterhouse.
- All passageways and doorways should be cleared to allow free movement of personnel.
- Any forklifts carrying batches of poultry transport containers should have a clear route into, and out of, the poultry house. Forklifts must have fully-functioning lights that enable the driver to clearly see personnel and any live birds in their path.
- Before catching begins, it is important to ensure that the vehicle transporting the birds to the slaughterhouse is suitably positioned for easy unloading and loading of the poultry transport containers. In certain weather conditions, it may be advisable for passively-ventilated vehicles to park alongside a series of fans that can be turned on once live birds in transport containers begin to be loaded onto the vehicle, in order to maintain the poultry at a comfortable temperature.
- The transport containers must be clean, dry (particularly important in freezing weather), undamaged and suitable for the size and type of bird being caught. If using a module-drawer system, also check each module frame is in good repair and its central supports are firmly fixed (such supports prevent incorrectly mounted drawers collapsing onto the drawer below).

General requirements for catching poultry

- Water must be available to birds right up to the time of catching and periodically available for birds waiting to be caught, depending upon the duration of the catching operation.
- Poultry house lighting should be reduced to the lowest/safest acceptable level or blue lighting used.
- Before catching begins, the transport containers should be placed as close as possible to the group of birds being caught, to minimise carrying distances.
- Any visibly unfit or injured birds should not be loaded into a transport container but must be immediately, humanely killed on-farm, by a suitably trained person.
- Loose-housed birds can be confined using mobile catching frames to make catching easier and to avoid birds having to walk excessive distances, which may cause exhaustion, particularly in warm weather. Birds must be approached quietly and calmly, to minimise disturbance, stress and the likelihood of birds running.
- If a group of birds needs to be walked towards the catching area, operatives should walk behind the birds at a speed that allows the birds to walk at a reasonable pace, without flapping, running or falling over (waterfowl are susceptible to tripping-over due to their leg position). If a flock is not used to regular handling by humans, it is advisable for operatives to only pick up birds when necessary, i.e. when loading a bird into a transport container, when a bird needs to be culled or if a bird is slow and cannot keep pace with the rest of the group when walked at a reasonable speed. If operatives decide to pick up any birds that are slower walkers, then during carriage the operative must refrain from any habitual gesticulations (e.g. those associated with ushering forward the rest of the group of birds) that might cause the held bird to be moved erratically and may cause fear and flapping. When the time comes, care should be taken to gently place the bird back down on the ground, onto its breast/feet before letting go of it. This will enable a bird to quickly regain its footing, which is especially important if other birds are rapidly jostling past. Birds should not be dropped from any height because this could cause injury and panic.
- Hold birds upright as much as possible; birds do not have diaphragms so being held upside-down causes discomfort and may obstruct breathing.
- Take care to avoid hitting any part of a bird against solid objects (e.g. transport container edges), which may cause pain and damage the meat.
- Birds should be lowered gently into transport containers, onto their breasts and allowed to regain their balance before further birds are added to the container.
- Try to limit the risk of birds escaping by temporarily closing the container opening when not in the process of loading, or by incrementally closing drawers back into the module frame as the drawer fills up. Otherwise, birds may jump out of the container, which, if it is a top-level module drawer, is quite a distance to fall and could result in injury when the bird hits the ground. If any bird escapes it should immediately be re-caught as calmly and quietly as possible.
- Take care to ensure birds do not get injured when closing container openings, i.e. when closing the doors of fixed crates or while pushing drawers into module frames. Close module drawers gently to avoid birds inside losing balance and flapping, and to reduce the severity of any trapping injuries. Any sudden, high-pitch vocalisations

might indicate a bird has been hurt and might warrant a quick visual check of the drawer, without opening it. Module drawers must be filled from the top drawer to the bottom to avoid the possibility of injuring birds in the tray below when returning drawers to their original closed position. Follow the manufacturer's instructions.

- Once loaded, individual transport containers must be carried upright, to prevent birds sliding around in a container. When putting down a container, make sure birds' toes do not get caught or crushed against the ground. (Avoid using containers with floor perforations that are large enough for birds' toes to protrude through.)
- There should be two catching team supervisors, one in the poultry house to oversee catching (including to check no birds are straying into the transit path of a forklift carrying poultry transport containers in and out of the poultry house) and another outside to oversee loading of the poultry transport containers onto the transport vehicle. The latter supervisor is responsible for checking each container of birds that exits the poultry house, to ensure no birds are inappropriately loaded and at risk of suffering for prolonged periods of time during transport and then in lairage at the slaughterhouse. Inappropriate loading includes birds that are upside-down on their backs in the container (particularly larger species like turkeys/geese which may find it impossible to right themselves in height-restricted containers), or have obvious injuries (e.g. broken limbs), or have trapped limbs or heads protruding from the containers. This supervisor should also check that all drawers are correctly mounted within module frames, to ensure all birds have the maximum available headroom and are not at risk of a drawer collapsing on top of them.
- If birds are to be unloaded from transport containers whilst alive, the container design should allow handlers to remove birds gently and easily without injury. Further information is available in other HSA publications listed at the end of this leaflet.

Single- or multiple-bird catching

Ideally, for better bird welfare, the HSA recommends that adult birds should be handled and supported individually. For example, chickens should be lifted by placing the palm of each hand on each side of the bird's body, over the wings (in their closed position, held against the bird's body), so the operative's thumbs lie across, and have control of, the bird's shoulders and therefore its wings (Figure 1). (Care must be taken not to put excessive pressure on the abdomen since this may lead to respiratory obstruction or the breakage of eggs inside female birds.) However, the HSA acknowledges that upright, individual handling is not always practical in large-scale commercial environments where typically more than one bird is carried in each hand. For example, the majority of broiler chickens may be caught/held by only one leg. If a person needs to carry multiple chickens at once, the HSA suggests that, to avoid injury and birds suffering, good practice is to catch and carry a chicken by **both** legs. The HSA recognises this recommendation may cause considerable economic challenges but urges the industry, worldwide, to explore ways of moving towards the change. Double-leg catching is also a recommendation within Defra's *Code of Practice for the Welfare of Meat Chickens and Meat Breeding Chickens* and the *Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of Laying Hens*. Welfare codes are not law, but failure to follow their provisions may be used as evidence in court when a prosecution is taken for causing unnecessary pain or distress to livestock.



Figure 1. Broiler chicken being lifted individually. Image: HSA *Poultry Welfare – Taking Responsibility* DVD.

Specific techniques

The method of handling depends on the species of bird being caught and its housing. Each is considered separately in the guidance below, which is for the catching and handling of large flocks being transported by crate or module to the slaughterhouse.

Chickens

Broilers (meat chickens) and loose-housed end-of-lay hens

- Birds should be caught by grasping the legs around the lower shanks (just above the feet; Figure 2). They should be caught by **both legs** to avoid injury or suffering.
- Care should be taken to ensure a bird's shanks are held side-by-side, within the catcher's hand (Figure 3), to stop the bird's legs crossing over in the hand and digging in, which may cause pain or discomfort to both the bird and the catcher.
- Once caught, the bird should be lifted gently, with its head hanging downward.
- If a bird starts flapping it could damage itself; gently rest its breast against the side of your thigh for a few seconds to help calm the bird.
- When multiple birds are carried, the catcher should hold them securely and comfortably, without causing the birds distress or injury. As a guide, no more than three chickens should be carried in one hand. (No more than two broiler breeder chickens should be carried in one hand.)
- Chickens must **never** be lifted or carried by the head, neck, wing(s) or tail.

Figure 2 (left image). Model chicken being 'caught' by both legs by moving fingers alongside/between the legs. **Figure 3 (right image).** Broiler chickens being held in one hand, by both legs, without allowing the legs to dig into each other. Images: left: HSA; right: HSA Poultry Welfare – Taking Responsibility DVD.



Caged end-of-lay hens

- Birds must be individually removed from a cage.
- Hens should be caught by grasping the legs around the lower shanks (just above the feet; Figure 2). They should be caught by **both legs** to avoid injury or suffering.
- Care should be taken to ensure a bird's shanks are held side-by-side within the catcher's hand (Figure 3), to stop the bird's legs crossing over in the hand and digging in, which may cause pain or discomfort to both the bird and the catcher.
- A bird's breast should be supported during removal from a cage, or a breast support slide used.
- Once removed from the cage, a bird may be directly placed into a transport container or handed to a second person to transfer it to the container. If multiple hens are carried to the containers, the handler should hold them securely and comfortably, without causing the birds distress or injury. As a guide, no more than three hens should be carried in one hand.
- If a bird starts flapping it could damage itself; gently rest its breast against the side of your thigh for a few seconds to help calm the bird.
- Hens must **never** be lifted or carried by the head, neck, wing(s) or tail.

Turkeys

- Small growing turkeys (7–14 weeks old or up to 8 kg liveweight) should be caught by **both legs**, gently lowering the bird onto its breast and lifting, holding the turkey against your body and placing your arm over the wing(s) to prevent flapping.
- Adult turkeys (14–21 weeks old) can be lifted by gently grasping the shoulder of the wing furthest away from you, while your free hand gently grips the legs. The turkey should then be lifted and held close to your body. Alternatively, follow Figure 4.

- Adult turkeys can also be caught and lifted by both shoulder joints.
- Once caught, the bird should be loaded into the container head first, taking care to ensure that the keel of the bird does not impact with the front edge of the container. Any impact may result in breast bruising which is painful to the bird and likely to cause downgrading at the slaughterhouse.
- Turkeys must **never** be lifted or carried by the head, neck, wing or tail. **Never** lift a turkey by a single leg with no other body support.

Figure 4 (left image). Turkey being lifted by the shoulder nearest to the operative and by the leg furthest from the operative. Figure 5 (right image). Goose being carried whilst gently controlling the head using the neck. Images: HSA *Poultry Welfare – Taking Responsibility* DVD.



Ducks and geese

- Ducks should be handled by placing one hand on each side of the body, over the wings, and lifting the bird.
- Geese should be handled by placing one arm around the body and lifting the bird under the armpit, whilst the other hand carefully holds onto the neck (Figure 5).
- Adult geese may also be caught and lifted by both shoulder joints, with a finger inbetween, to separate, each shoulder. Ideally the breast should be fully supported simultaneously.
- Ducks and geese must not be lifted, held suspended or carried by the neck unless, at the same time, the breast of the bird is fully supported as well. When lifting a bird by the neck, care must be taken to hold the neck just below the head, to ensure a bird's head/neck is not twisted, and its windpipe is not squeezed or otherwise obstructed.
- No more than two ducks, or one goose, should be lifted in each hand and the necks of the two ducks must be separated by the finger(s) of the operative.
- Ducks and geese must **never** be lifted or carried by the head, wing or tail. Inappropriate catching and handling can easily lead to ducks and geese becoming lame, therefore they should **never** be carried by the leg(s).
- Crossing and interlocking the wings of geese as a means of restraint to prevent flapping is not considered acceptable, humane practice.

Guinea fowl and quail

- Guinea fowl and quail should be lifted by placing one hand on each side of the body, over the wings with the legs hanging free.
- Alternatively, guinea fowl may be caught and carried by **both legs**.
- Guinea fowl and quail are very flighty, so the openings to transport containers need to be an appropriate size and carefully controlled to stop birds flying back out of the container.
- Guinea fowl and quail must **never** be lifted or carried by the head, neck, wing(s) or tail. For quail, there is a high risk of bone breakage so they must **never** be caught or carried by the legs.

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Legislation and other publications for further reading

Council Regulation (EC) No. 1099/2009 (killing of animals)	OJ of the EU	2009
Council Regulation (EC) No.1/2005 (transport of animals)	OJ of the EU	2005
The Welfare of Animals at the Time of Killing (England) Regulations	Defra	2015
The Welfare of Animals (Transport) (England) Order	Defra	2006
HSA Poultry Welfare – Taking Responsibility DVD package		2006
HSA Online Guides to Electrical Waterbath Stunning of Poultry and to Practical Slaughter of Poultry at www.hsa.org.uk/publications/online-guides		

Full details of this legislation can be found at www.legislation.gov.uk and <http://europa.eu>