

Preparing cattle for slaughter

Guidance on preparing cattle for slaughter.

Clearly, the aim should be to prevent animals becoming dirty in the first place, but some degree of cleaning prior to slaughter may be necessary (refer to [Appendix 1](#) for Regulations).

Numbers of dirty cattle presented to UK abattoirs decline from March onwards, as cattle naturally shed the winter coat and any dirt they may be carrying. However, some native British breeds tend not to shed the long winter coat as early as other cattle, and are therefore more likely to require attention before slaughter.

For cattle finished on silage, roots, brewers grains etc., consider changing to a drier ration, e.g. a cereal-based ration, as cattle approach finished condition. Inspect every animal regularly during finishing and before it leaves the farm, using the examples in [Appendix 2](#).

Clipping may be necessary, or cattle may self-clean sufficiently if moved to a “marketing yard” with adequate bedding. Research has shown that cattle fed on straw and water only, for up to 36 hours before transporting to slaughter, have reduced dung contamination during transport. Some retailers now require this method of feeding. This period should not be prolonged as there is no additional benefit for increasing this time period beyond 48 hours.

Avoid washing finished cattle before slaughter. The hide must be completely dry before the animal leaves the farm as hide moisture has been linked to an increased level of bacteria recovered from the hide. Never use a power hose to clean cattle. This is distressing for the animal and likely to cause bruising and reduced carcase value.

- assess finishing cattle cleanliness and take appropriate action
- consider finishing diet
- use a straw-bedded ‘marketing yard’ (see below) for dirty cattle
- achieve dry hides

The Marketing Yard

If cattle need to be cleaned up prior to slaughter, they may need to be moved to a marketing yard. A marketing yard should provide the best possible conditions to encourage cattle cleanliness: adequate supplies of good quality straw bedding and sufficient space allowance (see [Appendix 4](#)). Ideally, such conditions should exist in the usual finishing pens. Animals that are simply wet or slightly dirty may then be fit for market within a day or so, but if cattle are very dirty they could require 3 to 4 weeks to clean up in an adequately bedded yard. Evidence shows that mixing groups of animals increases the risk of contamination transfer and should therefore be kept to a minimum.

Research has also shown that bacteria can survive well in livestock environments, so ideally the area should be cleaned and disinfected before a new group of animals is introduced. Good housing design and management that will encourage cleanliness are obviously important.

- ensure sufficient time is allowed within the marketing yard for animals to clean up
- provide adequate bedding
- house cattle at the correct stocking density
- provide a suitable diet - sudden changes in diet will cause a digestive upset

Clipping cattle prior to slaughter

If cattle remain dirty, it may be necessary to clip them just prior to slaughter to clean them up. Remove excessive dirt by clipping, particularly on the brisket, flanks, belly, legs, knee and hock joints (areas from which the risk of contamination transfer to the carcase is high).

Great care is needed during clipping to avoid injury to the animal or to staff. Further guidance for clipping is given in the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Agriculture Information Sheet No 35 ([Appendix 5](#)), which should be read and understood before undertaking clipping.

- use well maintained clippers with an appropriate comb to prevent nicking the skin
- wear suitable protective clothing: a hard hat and steel-capped boots
- use a circuit breaker and do not clip wet cattle
- cattle should be securely restrained in an appropriate crush – see HSE Agriculture Information Sheet No 35 in [Appendix 5](#)
- remain calm, quiet and confident throughout the whole clipping-process
- begin clipping on a clean area of the back, to accustom the animal to the noise and feel of the clippers, before moving to the belly and legs
- be prepared to clip particularly dirty animals over a number of days to avoid unnecessary stress to the animal