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**Slaughterhouse workers: Dying for a job**

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*By Lindsay Rajt  Posted by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals* [*(about the submitter)*](http://www.opednews.com/author/author5357.html)(see below for this)

The “head table” at the Quality Pork Processors slaughterhouse in Austin, Minnesota, is not a place of honor. Until recently, it was where workers cut up pigs’ heads and shot compressed air into their skulls, causing their brains to come tumbling out. At least 18 employees who worked the head table have developed a mysterious neurological illness as a result, with symptoms ranging from weakness and fatigue to acute paralysis.

In all, according to figures recently released by researchers, at least 24 slaughterhouse employees—possibly more—in Minnesota, Indiana and Nebraska have the illness. All of the affected employees worked in a part of the plants that used compressed air to remove pigs’ brains. Researchers believe the air turned some brain matter into a fine mist that was inhaled by the workers; the plants have since discontinued the practice.

While these are isolated incidents—most slaughterhouses do not use this technique, and the condition is not thought to be transmittable—illnesses, injuries and even deaths at slaughterhouses are shockingly routine. What’s even more shocking? If you eat meat, you are funding the daily exploitation of these workers.

According to the Department of Labor, nearly one in three slaughterhouse workers suffers from illness or injury every year; in other manufacturing jobs, the rate is one in 10. Killing animals who do not want to die is inherently dangerous work. As chickens are hung by their legs to be killed, they fight back—beating their wings and scratching and pecking workers. Cows and pigs who are still conscious when they are hung up by their hind legs kick and thrash.

Workers on the killing floor are in constant contact with feces, vomit and diseased animals, so it’s no surprise that they often fall ill themselves. One study of slaughterhouse workers by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health found that half tested positive for campylobacter bacteria, which can cause diarrhea, stomach cramps and fever.

A worker at a Smithfield slaughterhouse told Human Rights Watch that he had breathing difficulties at work and red rashes on his arms and hands: “I think I have an allergic reaction to hogs. But I’m afraid to say anything about this because I’m afraid they will fire me.”

One of the most serious hazards for slaughterhouse employees is the high line speed. Workers must hoist, kill or cut several animals each minute, usually with few breaks. Some aren’t even given time to relieve themselves during their shift. A Teamster investigator told *The Nation* magazine that during meetings with slaughterhouse workers, “People were crying, talking about being covered in diarrhea the entire shift because the supervisor wouldn’t let them go to the bathroom.”

When employees are forced to work covered in their own waste, you can imagine how the animals are treated. Improperly stunned hogs kick and scream as they are drowned in tanks of scalding-hot water, used to soften their skin. Cows struggle as the skin is ripped from their bodies. Chickens, who aren’t even included in the only federal law designed to protect animals killed for food, have their throats slit while they’re still conscious and are scalded to death in tanks of hot water by the millions.

Even if you aren’t sympathetic to the plight of workers or animals, consider this: The same uncaring system that allows workers to be exposed to a toxic mist of animals’ brains and animals to be scalded alive also allows carcasses contaminated with feces and vomit, tapeworms and abscesses, to be sent down the line. The meat industry is not going to change, but we can: It’s time to leave the broken bodies of animals off our plates and go vegetarian.

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About the Submitter: People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), with more than 2 million members and supporters, is the largest animal rights organization in the world. PETA focuses its attention on the four areas in which the largest numbers of animals suffer the most intensely for the longest periods of time: on factory farms, in laboratories, in the clothing trade, and in the entertainment industry. PETA staffers have had their articles and opinion pieces published in everything from BUST magazine to The Wall Street Journal, and several staffers post pieces to OpEdNews.com using this account.