

Slaughterhouses: a major target for Covid-19 prevention

Press release from the French National Academy of Medicine and the
Veterinary Academy of France

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Since the beginning of the pandemic, significant outbreaks of Covid-19 have occurred among industrial slaughterhouse employees (including poultry and swine) in several countries including France, Germany, the Netherlands, Ireland, Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada and Brazil. As with the recent outbreak in Germany in the largest pig slaughterhouse in Europe, affecting nearly 1,500 of the 6,139 people in the establishment, the infection has primarily affected foreign employees, who are more vulnerable due to their precarious situation.

The origin of contamination is human and does not apply to slaughtered animals. Pigs and poultry have been experimentally shown to be resistant to Sars-CoV-2. Similarly, the meat does not present any proven risk of contamination for the consumer.

Environmental factors favor the development of Covid-19 outbreaks in slaughterhouses. The atmosphere in the slaughter and cutting rooms is cold and humid, with little natural light. The survival and spread of the virus are favored by ventilation and pressurized water cleaning systems. The permanent wearing of masks is difficult, especially in these enclosed spaces where the noise level often requires people to get closer and raise their voices to exchange between colleagues, which favors viral transmission through saliva droplets. In the deboning and cutting workshops, where working temperatures are often low (4°C to 10°C), the water vapor released by employees' breathing leads to a rapid condensation and humidification of the masks, which impairs their filtration capacity. Finally, promiscuity conditions make it difficult to respect a physical distance, both in the locker rooms and on the work line or during breaks.

Socio-economic factors play an important role in the risk of Covid-19. In large slaughterhouses, the diversity of languages and cultures associated with the hiring of foreign workers complicates the implementation of biosecurity measures. They are often foreigners recruited on a subcontracting basis and people living in precarious conditions (collective housing with high human density, precarious housing of large families, where promiscuity increases the risk of contagion). The means of travel used by these employees (buses, carpooling) favor the spread of the virus, both inside and outside the facilities.

The French National Academy of Medicine and the Veterinary Academy of France recommend:

- to integrate slaughterhouse staff into a national Covid-19 screening program among people in precarious situations [1];
- to strengthen the medical surveillance of slaughterhouse personnel;

- to reinforce the control of working conditions and the compliance with preventive measures, according to the joint instruction of the Ministry of Labor and the Ministry of Agriculture and Food [2]. These controls should focus on individual protective equipment, means of physical distancing, and the conditions of collective housing for staff on precarious contracts;
- to reinforce the control by the veterinary services of the hygiene rules applying to personnel, premises, equipment and handling.

1. Precariousness: an increased risk of Covid-19 Press release from the National Academy of Medicine and the National Academy of Pharmacy June 21, 2020

2. French Veterinary Academy Press Release N°10. Recommendations on the protection of the food chain: The special case of slaughter establishments. April 30, 2020.