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The welfare of ducks during foie gras production

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Abstract

*This review, which focuses on foie gras production from ducks in France, highlights welfare problems that may arise in the final (third) stage of production, when force-feeding occurs and which lasts 12 to 15 days. Welfare problems arising in the first two stages are also considered. The male mulard duck, a non-migratory hybrid between a muscovy drake (*Cairina moschata*) and a female domestic duck (*Anas platyrhynchos*), is used most frequently despite being fearful, nervous and maladapted to force-feeding conditions. During the period of force-feeding, mortality is 2 to 6%, higher than in fattening units for meat production. Welfare deteriorates markedly as ducks progress through the three production stages. Posture and gait abnormalities and wing lesions develop, and contact dermatitis is widespread and often severe. Oesophagitis and other injuries are documented. Steatosis and other liver changes are pathological and can limit duck survival. Group housing necessitates the use of crowd-gates to facilitate force-feeding of birds, which show aversive behaviour towards the force-feeder. Cages are small, with a mesh floor without litter or a rest area. Access to open water for bathing or full immersion of the head may be insufficient and make thermoregulation difficult. We conclude that force-feeding causes very poor welfare in ducks and should not be practised. Should foie gras production without force-feeding become possible, duck livers should not reach a weight at which there are pathological effects. Inadequate housing and management conditions should be prevented by establishing limits for the prevalences of contact dermatitis (foot-pad and digits), breast lesions and gait abnormalities, which should not be exceeded prior to slaughter. Limits should also be established for the prevalence of wing and other body lesions after slaughter.*

Keywords: *animal welfare, control of feeding behaviour, foie gras, force-feeding, liver steatosis, mulard duck*