

~Dairy Details~

Produced by Northern Valley Dairy Production Medicine Center

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“Nature is cruel, we don’t have to be”

Death. It’s a part of the circle of life and one that farmers, who commit themselves to caring for their animals, deal with on a regular basis. As we all know, things never go right all the time on the farm. Cows go down, break their leg, get sick, etc. Do you have a plan for these cows? How can you help end their pain and suffering? Temple Grandin, a world-renowned expert in livestock handling and welfare, once said “nature is cruel, we don’t have to be”. Euthanasia is defined as a “good death” that occurs with minimal pain and distress. Providing humane euthanasia to suffering animals is a key responsibility of all animal caretakers.

We have protocols for all sorts of things we do with cows on a daily basis, including breeding and treatment protocols, vaccination schedules, milking routines, etc., but protocols for humane euthanasia are often overlooked. How we handle cows that should be euthanized is an important issue for our consuming public, and it should be important to us as their caregivers. Our doctors encourage you to work with us to develop a euthanasia protocol that works for your farm and your employees. We would be happy to help train farm personnel to identify animals that should be euthanized and how to properly euthanize animals on farm.

What cows should be euthanized?

How do we decide what animals to sell and what animals to euthanize? Remember that animals sold for slaughter usually won’t actually be killed for 2-3 days after they leave the farm. Depending on the distance to the slaughter facility, we need to ask if the animal can comfortably handle a long truck ride. Animals to consider for humane euthanasia include:

- Down animals not responding to treatment
- Sick animals not responding to treatment, not eating, and have drug residues. No one wants to eat, or should eat, sick animals, and it is illegal to slaughter animals that contain drug residues. Every animal you sell should be one you would eat yourself.
- Severely lame animals that don’t respond to treatment and/or are in severe pain. They should not be subjected to a long truck ride and run the risk that they could go down on the truck, making them unusable for human consumption.
- Animals with broken bones or severe injuries.

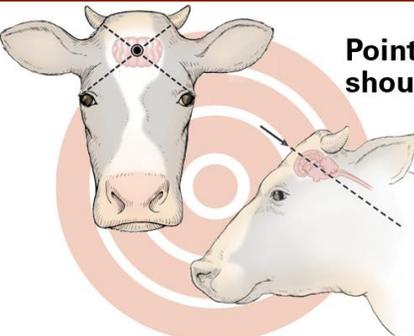
Proper euthanasia methods

The American Veterinary Medical Association has approved three methods of euthanasia for cattle.

1. **IV injection of pentobarbital:** Pentobarbital stops the animal’s heart, leading to an immediate, painless death. Only a veterinarian can give Pentobarb injections. Disadvantages include the risk to other animals (such as dogs, cats or wildlife) on the farm if they ingest the carcass, and most rendering companies will not take animals euthanized with Pentobarb. The drug itself is expensive, and when added to the cost of a veterinary visit, this is the most expensive method of euthanasia.

2. **Gunshot:** Gunshot and captive bolt (see below) are similar methods. Farm personnel can do humane euthanasia with this method, but should be trained to insure proper placement of the bullet so loss of consciousness is instantaneous. The target should be the point where the lines drawn from the outside of the corner of the eye to the base of the opposite horn intersect (see picture). We are targeting the brainstem with this method. A 22 caliber gun is acceptable to use on calves, but larger animals will require a 22 magnum or higher caliber. After the shot is placed and the animal is unconscious, it may need to be bled out or given a dose of Potassium Chloride to stop the heart.

Humane Euthanasia Procedures For Sick, Injured, and/or Debilitated Cattle



Point of Entry of projectile in cattle should be at the intersection of two imaginary lines, each drawn from the outside corner of the eye to the base of the opposite horn. High in the center of the forehead, but Not Between the Eyes!

NOT BETWEEN THE EYES!

3. **Captive bolt:** The captive bolt (see picture) is a device that is used the same as a firearm, but with a little less risk for the user and anyone nearby during the euthanasia. While the target is the same as a gun, the captive bolt is held right up against the animal's head. Our practice is now offering euthanasia by captive bolt for our clients. It's a more economical option than a lethal dose of pentobarbital, and justified for farms that don't feel comfortable euthanizing with a firearm. With this service, we hope to help producers improve animal welfare on their farms by not letting cost be the reason a cow is left to die a slow painful death.



Every cow on your farm should have an "end-of-life-plan". If you have any questions about proper on farm euthanasia or would like to develop euthanasia protocols, please contact one of our veterinarians. The below website is an excellent resource for euthanasia protocols with printable English and Spanish versions.

<http://vetmed.iastate.edu/vdpam/extension/dairy/programs/humane-euthanasia>

