

Home Processing of Sheep and Goats for Meat

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The versatility and adaptability of sheep and goats enables them to be raised relatively inexpensively on small acreages. In addition, lamb (meat from sheep under one year old), mutton (meat from older sheep) and goat meat (chevon) are common parts of the diet of many different people groups.

Sheep and goats are often home slaughtered for consumption at family gatherings, ceremonial meals, or religious celebrations. Lambs are generally slaughtered when they weigh 100 to 150 pounds, but some consumers prefer leaner lighter weight lambs weighing 40 to 60 pounds and others prefer mature sheep weighing 120 to over 300 pounds. Goat kids are usually slaughtered at 40 to 85 pounds, but some people prefer larger kids weighing up to 130 pounds and others prefer mature goats weighing up to 250 pounds.

Safe food handling practices must be used during home slaughter and processing to ensure meat is free from disease-causing organisms and contamination. It also very important to understand meat from home slaughtered animals cannot be sold—it is for personal use only.

Because sheep and goat meat processing procedures are very similar, this publication uses photos of both sheep and goats to demonstrate various stages of processing. NOTE: check local zoning ordinances to ensure home butchering is allowed on a given property; also investigate how inedible or undesired parts of a carcass can be discarded legally.

General Sanitation Procedures

1. If possible, start with a clean animal; it is also best if the animal has been held off feed overnight. A full belly makes the skinning and especially the evisceration process much more difficult. The animal should always have access to water—that addresses animal welfare concerns, and dehydration makes pelt removal more difficult.
2. Clean and sanitize the work area before starting work. Many websites give detailed descriptions of good methods of home sanitation including safety precautions (see resource list). It is important to note sanitizers will not be effective if the surfaces are not clean before application; this is particularly true for the most common home sanitizer, chlorine bleach.
3. Wash and sanitize hands; put on disposable gloves if desired.
4. Have sanitizer available for hands and knife for use during procedure.
5. Sanitize knife and hands between steps, drying with paper towel afterwards.
6. Do not allow the hair side of the hide to touch the meat.
7. Wash and sanitize hands that have been in contact with the outside of the hide before touching the meat.

Carcass Dressing Steps

1. Humane slaughter: REFER TO THE DIAGRAMS AND INSTRUCTIONS IN THE RESOURCES AT THE END OF THIS PUBLICATION. *Animal welfare and human safety must be prioritized. Extreme care must be exercised for human safety if a rifle is used, and someone proficient with firearms should perform this step to maximize effectiveness.* To stun the animal using a captive bolt stunner or .22 gauge rifle, draw an imaginary line from the left eye to the right ear and another line from the right eye to the left ear and aim for where the lines intersect. After stunning the animal, exsanguinate (bleed) it with a sharp sanitized knife by a cut through the jugular veins at the throat, where the neck joins the head.
2. Hoist the animal by a hind leg. Skin the opposite hind leg and remove the lower part of that leg. Sanitize and dry knife and hands. See photo 1. Note: processors may choose to wear disposable gloves and protective eyewear during processing. This personal protective equipment is recommended to reduce the risk of disease transmission.



Photo 1. Dressing step #2
(photo by Terry Dillman).



Photo 2. Dressing step #3 (photo by Susan Kerr).

3. Hang the carcass by the Achilles tendon of the skinned leg. Skin the other leg. Sanitize and dry knife and hands. See photo 2.
4. Remove skin from the groin area and cut around the “bung” (anus and rectum). Place a plastic bag over the end of the bung and tie a string around it to prevent fecal contamination of the carcass. Sanitize and dry knife and hands. See photo 3.



Photo 3. Dressing step #4
(photo by Susan Kerr).



Photo 4. Dressing step #5
(photo by Susan Kerr).

5. Skin the front of the animal with a knife. Sanitize and dry knife and hands. See photo 4.
6. Use a fist to remove the hide from the sides of the animal. Sanitize hands before using fist, after switching sides, and after using fist. See photos 5a and 5b.



Photo 5a. Dressing step #6, sheep
(photo by Susan Kerr).



Photo 5b. Dressing step #6, goat
(photo by Terry Dillman).

7. Skin around the front legs, shoulders, and front side of the neck with a knife. Sanitize and dry knife and hands.
8. During the process, trim off any visible contamination such as feces or hair with sanitized knife, then rinse the area with water.

9. Pull the hide from the back (Photo 9a) and neck (Photo 9b) of the carcass. Sanitize and dry hands.



Photos 9a (left) and 9b (right). Dressing step 9 (photo by Terry Dillman).

10. Cut the esophagus and windpipe free from the neck and tie off the esophagus to prevent stomach contents from spilling out. (Notice esophagus hanging free just below the shoulder in photo 10).
11. Carefully make an incision down the belly midline with the sharp side of the knife oriented to the outside of the carcass, being careful not to cut into internal organs. Carefully remove the organs (intestinal tract, heart, lungs, liver, spleen, kidneys, bladder, uterus) without cutting into or tearing them. Set aside organs to be kept in sanitized receptacles; cover to protect from flies and cool as soon as possible. Sanitize and dry knife and hands. See photo 11.
12. Trim any fecal or other contamination and wash the carcass with warm water to remove any blood or debris that may be on the surface.
13. The finished dressed carcass is shown in Photo 12.
14. Any undesired offal (organs, intestinal contents, etc.) not intended for use should be buried, landfilled, or composted; refer to local ordinances for legal disposal options.



Photo 10. Dressing step #10
(photo by Terry Dillman).



Photo 11. Dressing step #11
(photo by Susan Kerr).



Photo 12. Finished carcass
(photo by Terry Dillman).

Preparing Sheep and Goat Meat for Cooking or Storage

If a goat carcass is going to be cooked the same day as processing, it can be boned out or sawed/chopped into cuts for cooking. The cooking process should begin within 2 hours of slaughter for safety and tenderness reason. The meat will be tender if it is cooked before it goes into rigor mortis.

If a sheep or goat carcass will not be consumed immediately and there is a place to chill and store the carcass at less than 40°F, it will be useful to age the carcass for 3 to 7 days to increase tenderness, especially if a dry heat cooking method will be used. Meat can be wrapped and frozen at less than 0°F for longer periods of storage.

For fresh stew, leave meat on bones and cut into portions to fit the size of the stew pot; cook within two hours. Some people also cover and refrigerate in a salt solution overnight to reduce the goat/lamb flavor. The next day, pour off the salt water, rinse the meat, add spices, and cook.

Focus on Food Safety

Use a meat thermometer to ensure cooked cuts reach a minimum internal temperature of 145°F and ground meat reaches 160°F before consumption. Promote food safety by always keeping hot foods hot (above 140°F) and cold foods cold (below 40°F) and refrigerate leftovers at 40°F or below promptly.

Resources

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations: Guidelines for Humane Handling, Transport and Slaughter of Livestock

www.fao.org/3/x6909e/x6909e.pdf

Iowa State University College of Veterinary Medicine Anatomical Landmarks

<https://tinyurl.com/antomicallandmarks>

Iowa State University College of Veterinary Medicine Euthanasia Downloads

<https://tinyurl.com/humaneeeuthanasia>

LSU AgCenter Meat Goat Selection, Carcass Evaluation & Fabrication Guide

<https://tinyurl.com/meatgoatfabrication>

USDA Agricultural Marketing Service Institutional Meat Purchase Specification (cutting guides)

<https://www.ams.usda.gov/grades-standards/imps>

USDA Food Safety

<https://tinyurl.com/ycrxo9md> and <https://www.foodsafety.gov/keep-food-safe/4-steps-to-food-safety>

UDSA FSIS Lamb from Farm to Table

<https://tinyurl.com/lambfarmtotable>

USDA FSIS Goat from Farm to Table

<https://tinyurl.com/goatfarmtotable>