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Effect of gender and slaughter age on carcass and meat quality of brown hares (*L. europaeus*)

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The present study aimed at evaluating slaughter and carcass traits and meat quality in 48 farmed brown hares (*L. europaeus*) of both genders slaughtered at two ages (sub-adult hares, on average 73 d, *vs.* adult reproducing hares, on average 17 months) and then dissected following standardized procedures for rabbits. At slaughter, the females were heavier than the males (2783 *vs.* 2629 g; $P<0.05$), showed higher full gut incidence (13.7 *vs.* 12.9%; $P<0.05$), lower skin and distal fore and hind leg incidence (13.3 *vs.* 14.0%; $P<0.01$), and lower dressing percentage (66.7 *vs.* 67.6%; $P=0.06$). The carcasses of females had lower dissectible fat (1.34 *vs.* 2.17%; $P<0.05$) and higher proportion of both l. lumborum (14.3 *vs.* 13.8%; $P<0.05$) and hind legs (37.2 *vs.* 36.4%; $P=0.06$). When age increased, slaughter live weight (2022 to 3391 g) and carcass weight increased ($P<0.001$), but dressing percentage did not vary (67.2% on average); the gut incidence decreased (14.5 to 12.1%; $P<0.001$), whereas skin and distal leg proportion increased (12.9 to 14.5%; $P<0.001$). When age increased, head, liver and thoracic organ proportions decreased ($P<0.001$); dissectible fat (1.34 to 2.17%; $P<0.05$) and l. lumborum (13.5 to 14.5%; $P<0.001$) increased; moreover, hind leg proportion decreased (37.3 to 36.3%; $P=0.01$) but the muscle to bone ratio of hind legs increased (5.11 to 6.23; $P<0.001$). Meat quality did not vary with gender, whereas sub-adults significantly differed ($P<0.001$) from adults, showing lower meat pH, higher lightness index, higher redness index for l. lumborum (3.03 to 1.46) and lower redness index for b. femoris (4.07 to 5.76); besides they had higher meat thawing losses and lower shear force measured on the hind leg muscles (2.97 to 4.02 kg/g; $P<0.001$). In conclusions, in hares, slaughter and carcass traits differed according to both gender and age, whereas meat quality was affected only by age.

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