

Egg Factsheet

Viva!

A staggering 10 billion eggs are consumed in the UK every year. Over 85 per cent of these are produced domestically, with the nation's 28 million laying hens each laying an average of 314 eggs per year – nearly one per day (British Egg Information Service, website, 2006). In the wild hens would only lay 20 eggs in a whole year, but in farm sheds they are subjected to near constant lighting and fed high protein feed to increase egg production.

Types of housing

Cages

About 66 per cent of the eggs sold in the UK come from hens kept in cages (BEIS, website). Most of these cages are barren battery cages, in which each hen has just 550 cm² of space – about the area of a sheet of A4 paper (DEFRA, 2002). As a hen's wingspan is 76-80 cm – about the width of *four* pieces of A4 paper – they spend their entire lives unable to spread their wings. Without so much as a shred of straw for comfort, all of the hen's natural instincts – including nesting, perching, scratching and pecking – are denied. The bare wire mesh floor cuts into the hens' feet and they are forced to balance on slopes of up to 12 degrees (DEFRA, 2002). This is convenient for collecting the eggs as they all roll to one side, but incredibly uncomfortable for the hens.

In 1999, the Council of the European Union judged that battery cages are so cruel they should be banned across the EU – but not until 2012 (OJ, 1999). However, the EU Directive still permits the use of 'enriched' cages after this date. These must provide 750 cm² of space per hen as well as limited perching, nesting and scratching facilities (DEFRA, 2002). This meagre extra space requirement, less than a postcard sized space per bird, means hens will still be severely restricted and unable to stretch or flap their wings. As there will only be one nestbox and very limited perching and dustbathing areas in each cage, the hens will be forced to compete for access to these sites. Dominant hens may prevent others from ever accessing these facilities. Most birds in enriched cages will still spend a significant proportion of their time standing on wire mesh floors with little room to move around, and they will all still be denied fresh air and sunshine. For these reasons, all of the major animal welfare organisations in the EU continue to push for a complete ban on cages – conventional and enriched – to come into force in 2012.

Hens kept in both types of cage systems are routinely debeaked to prevent injury from aggressive cage-mates – a problem caused by the intensive conditions they are forced to endure (see more on debeaking below).

Percherries ('Barn eggs')

About 7 per cent of the eggs sold in the UK are 'barn eggs' (BEIS, website). While this term conjures up the image of a rustic hen house with a few dozen hens sitting peacefully on their own nests, the truth is somewhat different. Barn eggs actually come from hens kept in huge sheds called percherries. There is no limit to the number of hens who can be kept in a single perchery, which often reaches into the tens of thousands. Like enriched cages, percherries must provide perches, litter and nests, although there need only be one nest for every seven hens – leading to the same problem of competition for space as enriched cages. New percherries built since 2002 must provide 1100 cm² of floor space per hen (about two pieces of A4 paper), but

older percherries are allowed to provide as little as 830 cm² per hen (DEFRA, 2005a). Hens kept in this intensive system never go outdoors and many are still routinely debeaked.

Free-range

About 27 per cent of the eggs sold in the UK are free-range or organic (BEIS website). Eggs sold as 'free-range' must come from hens who have access to the outdoors. These hens are housed indoors in a perchery that must satisfy all the requirements listed above and, in addition, must have 'popholes' which are open during daylight hours to allow the hens access to the outdoors. The outdoor area that the hens can access must normally provide 4 m² of space per hen (DEFRA, 2005a). However, on average less than 10 per cent of the hens are outside at any given time, and many never go outside at all (Hegelund, 2005). Free-range farmers are encouraged, but not required, to make the outdoor range as attractive as possible so that the hens spend more time outdoors. But there is no way to tell from the egg carton whether the farmers have actually taken these measures, or whether the quality of life for their hens is just the same as for hens producing barn eggs.

Organic

All organic eggs are free-range, but not all free-range eggs are organic. To be sold as 'organic' in the UK, eggs must come from a farm that has been approved by one of ten certification bodies. However, not all of these organisations have the same standards for what makes a farm 'organic'. There is a national set of minimum standards that all 10 certification bodies must use, but many employ their own stricter criteria.

The national standards (DEFRA, 2005b) specify that organic farmers must allow laying hens access to the outdoors, and must allow them 1666 cm² of indoor floor space each. Routine debeaking is forbidden in organic egg production, so feather pecking can be a problem. Despite evidence that hens suffer greatly due to feather pecking when housed in flocks of more than 500 (Bestman 2003), organic egg farmers are permitted to keep hens in groups of up to 3000 (DEFRA 2005b).

The strictest standards for organic egg production are those of the Soil Association. They do not certify farms with flocks of more than 2000 hens and require extra space to be given to flocks of more than 500. This is still not ideal, but it means that hens on Soil Association certified farms are considerably less likely to be injured or killed by other hens. Cartons of eggs from Soil Association certified farms will bear the Soil Association logo. However, the Soil Association's standards are difficult to apply on farms large enough to supply the major supermarkets, so you may have difficulty finding these eggs. Most Waitrose stores stock Soil Association certified eggs, as do many health food shops, farmers' markets, organic box schemes and some greengrocers.

Slaughter

Slaughter of healthy young animals is just as much a part of egg production as it is a part of meat production. All eggs on the market today come from hens destined to be sent to the slaughterhouse after just a fraction of their natural lifespan, and all laying hens had brothers whose lives were even shorter than theirs.

To do otherwise would require increasing the price of eggs several fold, and would make egg production an even more resource-intensive operation than it already is. After one to two years of

laying, the number of eggs a hen can produce starts to decline. Male chickens, of course, lay no eggs at all. Allowing these animals to live out their natural lives (which can last up to 16 years (Plott, 2006) would require farmers to feed and house many times more birds than they currently do. This cost would be passed on to the consumer.

Chickens raised for meat are of a different breed from egg-laying chickens. Males of the egg-laying breed do not gain weight fast enough to be raised profitably for meat. Very few of them are needed for breeding future generations of laying hens, so most are killed shortly after birth. Lawful methods of doing this include ‘use of a mechanical apparatus producing immediate death’, ‘exposure to gas mixtures’ and ‘dislocation of the neck’ (SI, 1995). Some male chicks are instead sold to laboratories, where they are used for vivisection experiments. The problem of unwanted male chicks exists in all methods of egg production, from battery cages to organic.

Female layers that are no longer productive are known as ‘spent hens’. All worn-out hens, whether conventionally farmed or organic, are slaughtered when their egg production drops. Although their flesh is not of the same quality as that of chickens bred for their meat, it is still used in low-quality processed foods, such as soup, pies and baby food (Webster, 2004).

Feather pecking and debeaking

Hens subjected to the stresses of modern farming conditions tend to peck at one another. ‘Aggressive pecking’ is directed at the head of another bird and ‘feather pecking’ is directed at the plumage. Hens will often rip out the feathers of other hens, or even peck them to death and engage in cannibalism. In one study of hens kept in enriched cages, more than one out of every 30 hens was killed and eaten by the other birds. Remarkably, this level of cannibalism was declared to be ‘relatively low and within the production standard’ (Weitzenburger, 2005). The same researchers found that although feather pecking is thought to be a redirection of hens’ natural instinct to peck at the ground, providing them with a dust bath and straw chaff for foraging did not always help.

When hens injure and kill one another in this way, it hurts the farmer’s bottom line. Dead hens obviously lay no eggs, and hens that have lost a lot of their feathers need to eat more in order to keep warm (Bestman, 2003), so it’s in the interests of the egg industry to minimise these injuries. The most common solution is to cut off part of each hen’s beak, a process which is performed without anaesthesia. Those in the egg industry refer to this process as ‘beak trimming’, which makes it sound like a manicure or a haircut – but unlike human nails and hair, the part of the beak that is cut is very sensitive to pain as it is highly innervated (Davis, 2004). Hens whose beaks have been trimmed have difficulty eating properly later in life (Davis, 2004).

Beak trimming is currently prohibited in organic egg production, and will be prohibited in all EU egg production from January 2011 (DEFRA, 2002), but this development is not without its drawbacks. Beak trimming has been prohibited in Sweden since 1999, and an investigation into Swedish egg farms in 2002 found “a large number of birds” with “denuded parts of the body” due to feather pecking (Oden, 2002).

The egg industry is working on other methods of lessening the impact of pecking and cannibalism, either by addressing the causes of the behaviour or by breeding hens that are less aggressive by nature. But it’s not likely that these injuries will be eliminated entirely, since that would be prohibitively expensive. Sanctuaries which offer hens a genuinely free-range life in small flocks find that birds do not feather pick and have healthy, shining feathers.

Broken bones

Weight-bearing exercise is one of the best things humans can do to keep their bones strong and prevent osteoporosis. The same is true for chickens, but hens kept in cages so crowded that they have barely enough space to move around don't have much of a chance to exercise. This lack of exercise combined with the loss of calcium to the hundreds of eggshells produced over a hen's lifetime works out to a high rate of osteoporosis and a lot of broken bones. In fact, more than 45 per cent of laying hens break a bone at some point during their lives (Webster, 2004).

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