

FACTS ABOUT OUR FOOD

~BATTERY HENS~

Battery hens are kept to produce eggs. The term “battery” refers to the large numbers (or battery) of stacked cages in one barn. The battery hen is bred to lay the most eggs in the shortest amount of time.

-----OVERVIEW

Battery hens are imprisoned for life in battery cages during egg laying. These wire cages are so small the hens cannot spread their wings, so barren they have no nest in which to lay their eggs and so restricting the birds’ bones become brittle and can break through lack of exercise. They are caged like this all day, every day. After one year of confinement, their only release is slaughter.

Approximately 90-95% of Canada’s 25 million laying hens are kept in battery cages.

LIFE SENTENCE ON THE FACTORY FARM

Hens are kept in crowded and cramped battery cages, which typically hold 5-7 birds per cage. Each hen has about 70 square inches. Hens' natural behaviours are impossible to carry out in battery cages. While poultry have a social hierarchy, or “pecking order,” problems are likely to arise if flocks are not managed properly. As well, instances of cannibalism can occur as a result. To prevent outbreaks of aggression such as these, hens are de-beaked. Part of the bird's beak is sliced with a hot knife or lasered off — a severe mutilation. This “procedure” is performed without anesthesia. Evidence suggests “beak trimming” does not remove the motivation to peck. Beak cutting does not properly address the behavior it is trying to eradicate and causes acute and chronic pain.



Hens kept in a crowded battery cage on an Ontario egg farm

GENETIC SELECTION

Today's modern laying hen is descended from the Red Junglefowl, which lay approximately 10-15 eggs per year. Compare this with modern breeds of domestic hens in Canada, which produce about 305 eggs per year. Despite centuries of domestication, farmed hens retain their wild ancestors' natural behaviours. This "ancestral memory" means that modern breeds retain behaviours such as nest building, perching, scratching the ground and dust bathing. Battery cages render these behaviours impossible for the majority of the world’s egg-laying hens. In the near future, genetic selection could produce a bird with fewer tendencies to feather-peck and cannibalize, thus reducing or eliminating the need for de-beaking. However, Canada's primary breeding companies have not shown interest.

PHYSICAL AILMENTS

In addition to the psychological stresses caused by crowded cages and high egg production, battery hens experience severe physical ailments.

- High densities cause increased risk of respiratory and metabolic diseases.
- Lack of exercise and high egg production cause bone weakness, sometimes resulting in “cage layer fatigue” (CLF): a condition often compared to osteoporosis in humans. Hens have difficulty standing and may lose control of their legs and lie on their side. Usually there is no egg production, and the birds may die a slow death from paralysis and starvation.
- The hens’ claws grow long and twisted and can grow around the wire mesh, resulting in painful pressure. Examples include lesions, fissures, hyperkeratosis on the feet and twisted, broken or overgrown claws.
- Many battery cage hens lose many feathers from rubbing against each other or the cage walls, as well as from feather pecking, a major problem in laying hen welfare. This affects the birds’ ability to eat and stay warm.

FORCED MOULTING

The practice of starving or reducing feed to spike egg production is called forced moulting. Though not “routinely” practised in Canada, controlled moulting is allowed under certain circumstances. Similar practices are carried out in many areas of the U.S.

Moulting is the replacement of old feathers by new, a natural process unnaturally accelerated by withholding food and water and reducing light levels. It causes intense frustration, significant weight and feather loss and increased bone breakage and mortality.

TRANSPORTATION

Injuries during “catching”: After a hen’s egg production has slowed, she is considered “spent.” Chicken catchers reach into the cages and grab the birds by their feet from the battery cage, several at a time. Catchers pack the hens into transport “drawers” or crates. Chicken catchers work so quickly they cannot treat each hen with care. Many hens suffer broken legs and wings in the process.

Canada’s revised Code of Practice for Laying Hens (2017) has committed to more humane ways to “improve the welfare of hens when loading on-farm” with plans to phase out “shackle carts” — trolleys now used to carry spent hens, held upside down by their legs, to transport vehicles from cages — by 2022.

Death and injury during transport: Factors that put spent hens at particular risk during transport are their low economic value and long-distance travel from loading to final destination for slaughter. These birds suffer the highest dead-on-arrivals (DOAs) of all farmed animals. In Canada, 2% of spent hens die in transit due to stress, injuries during catching or from weather extremes, with mortality rates reaching more than 50% depending on the length of journey and weather

SLAUGHTER

Slaughter systems for spent hens vary across Canada. In some provinces, spent hens are suspended upside down by their feet in metal shackles for stunning in an electrified water bath. The procedure must induce fear as well as seriously aggravate the pain of osteoporosis and injuries from catching. Some spent hens are now rendered unconscious in CO2 gas while in “drawers,” then they are shackled by their legs and killed by whirling blades, which cut the hens’ necks. Their depleted bodies are used for chicken hot dogs and other spicy cooked meats. In some provinces, spent hens are gassed with CO2 and their bodies composted.

In terms of a hen’s lifespan, a natural one being anywhere from five to 10 years, most in the commercial egg industry are killed at about 70 weeks old (a year and a half).

CAGE-FREE ALTERNATIVES

Hens do not need to be caged to produce a lot of eggs. There are humane alternatives where hens can perform natural behaviours. Commercial cage-free alternatives in use around the world include free-range systems, where hens have access to the outdoors, or free-run systems, where the hens roam in large indoor sheds with nest boxes, scratching areas and perches. Research is exploring the best cage-free options for laying hens. Humane treatment of hens also rests on the competency and knowledge of employees who care for them.

GLOBAL PROGRESS

The world’s second-largest egg producer, the European Union (EU), banned battery cages by 2012. An expert committee of EU veterinary scientists concluded, “Battery cage systems provide a barren environment for the birds. ... It is clear that because of its small size and its barrenness, the battery cages as used at present have inherent severe disadvantages for the welfare of hens.”

In 2008, California banned the use of “inordinately small” battery cages. In 2010, they also put in place the requirement that all eggs sold in California, regardless of location of production, must comply with the 2008 law. Both laws became effective January 2015. Along with California, Michigan, Ohio, Oregon and Washington have implemented measures to either ban or restrict the use of battery cages.

As of 2017, roughly 100 grocery chains, 60 restaurant chains and other food businesses committed to changing to cage-free within the next decade in the U.S.

CANADIAN PROGRESS:

In early 2016, Canadian grocers, including Loblaws, Metro and Sobeys, committed to end the sale of eggs from battery-caged hens by the end of 2025.

In 2017, Canada’s National Farm Animal Care Council and the Egg Farmers of Canada published the revised *Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Pullets and Laying Hens*, which calls for an end to battery cages in Canada by July 2036. By July 2031, hens that remain in conventional cages must be given a minimum of 90 square inches per bird.

However, the ban of battery cages by 2036 does not mean laying hens in Canada will automatically be in cage-free conditions. Somewhat larger “enriched” housing systems will still be allowed.

Tell the Egg Farmers of Canada and your local grocer you want cage-free laying hens. Visit helpthechickens.ca/takeaction.php and take action.

For more information, please contact us

Email: info@humanefood.ca; Website: www.humanefood.ca
Mail: 131 Bloor Street West, Suite 200/140, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1R8