

FACTS ABOUT OUR FOOD

~BATTERY HENS~

Battery hens are kept to produce eggs. The term “battery” refers to the large numbers (or battery) of cages that are kept 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. These wire cages are so small that the hens cannot open their wings, so barren that they have no nest in which to lay eggs, and so restricting that the birds’ bones become brittle and can snap through lack of exercise. They are caged like this all day, every day. After one or two years’ confinement, their only release is slaughter.

An estimated 98% of Canada’s 30.8 million laying hens are kept in cages like this. The Canadian Coalition for Farm Animals believes it is time for a change.

LIFE SENTENCE ON THE FACTORY FARM

Battery hens are kept in cages generally 16” x 18”, and hold 4-6 hens each. Each hen has less living space than this sheet of paper. Treated like machines rather than living, feeling animals, the hens' natural behaviours are impossible in battery cages. Out of frustration, the hens often peck each other's feathers out. In addition, they can cannibalize each other. To prevent this, they are debeaked. Part of the bird's beak is sliced or lasered off - a severe mutilation that can cause severe and lasting pain.

GENETIC SELECTION

Today's modern laying hen or domestic fowl is descended from the Red Junglefowl. Females lay 5-6 eggs in a clutch before incubating for 18-20 days (del Hoyo et al, 1994). Compare this with modern breeds of domestic hen, which lays up to 300 eggs in a year. Despite centuries of domestication, farmed hens retain their wild ancestors' natural behaviours. This "ancestral memory", means that modern breeds need to carry out behaviours such as building a nest, perching, scratching at the ground and dust bathing. For the majority of the world's egg-laying hens, battery cages render these behaviours impossible.



*A crowded battery cage.
Photo courtesy of Factory Farming*

Researchers have stated that, within 6-8 years, genetic selection could produce a bird that has less tendency to feather-peck and cannibalize, therefore 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, battery hens experience severe physical ailments.

- High densities cause respiratory and metabolic diseases;
- Lack of exercise and high egg production cause bone weakness, sometimes resulting in cage layer fatigue; the hens have difficulty standing and may lose control of their legs and lie on their sides. 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;
- Many battery cage hens lose many of their feathers from rubbing against each other or the cage walls, as well as from feather pecking. This affects the bird’s ability to eat and stay warm.

FORCED MOLTING

The practice of starving mature hens to spike egg production is called forced molting. Although uncommon in Canada, it is common in the U.S. Molting is the replacement of old feathers by new and is a natural process which has been 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 dropped off – generally after one or two years – the birds are considered “spent hens”. Chicken catchers reach into the cages and grab the birds by their feet from the barn, several at a time. Once caught, the catchers carry the hens upside down out of the barn and pack them into crates for transport. Chicken catchers work so quickly they cannot treat each hen with care. As a result, many hens are injured or bruised during catching, often experiencing broken bones in the process (Turner & Lymbery, 1999). One European study found that during catching and crating, levels of the stress hormone corticosterone in battery hens were 10 times higher than normal.

Death and Injury During Transport - Factors which put spent hens at particular risk during transport are their low economic value and long distance travel from loading to final destination. They suffer the highest dead-on-arrivals (DOAs) of all farmed animals. In Canada, 2.1% of spent hens die in transit, either from injuries during catching or from weather extremes.

SLAUGHTER

Upside-down Shackle - The slaughter procedure for nearly all chickens is to suspend the birds upside down by their feet, in metal shackles. The procedure must induce fear, as well as seriously aggravate the pain of osteoporosis and injuries from catching.

Improper Stunning - After being shackled upside-down, chickens are rendered unconscious by immersion in electrified water (a stun bath) prior to being killed by having their throats cut. Stunning is followed by immersion in a bath of scalding water to loosen their feathers. However, not all hens are properly stunned. Birds not stunned in the water bath feel their throats being cut, and a few even get to the scalding water bath while fully conscious. According to University of Guelph chicken researcher Dr. Ian Duncan, "The majority of plants attempt to achieve electrical stunning prior to slaughter, but the actual success of the electrical water bath is difficult if not impossible to attain". A review by the U.K.'s Farm Animal Welfare Council (1982) concluded as many as two-thirds of all birds slaughtered were not properly stunned. The birds were either killed outright or not rendered unconscious.

CAGE-FREE ALTERNATIVES

Hens do not have 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.

GLOBAL PROGRESS

The world's second largest egg producer, the European Union (EU), has banned barren 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 has inherent severe disadvantages for the welfare of hens." Starting in 2004, European Union legislation will make it mandatory for eggs to be labeled according to method of production. The following terms will apply:

- Eggs from battery cages will be labelled “Eggs From Caged Hens”;
- Eggs from free-run barns will be labelled “Barn” eggs;
- Eggs from free-range hens will be labelled “Free-range.

Battery cages have been banned in Switzerland. Public concern about battery cages is also being felt in Australia and the USA.



*Chickens in an outdoor environment
Photo Courtesy of Farm Sanctuary*

For more information, please contact us

info@humanefood.ca

By mail: 213-33 Hazelton Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M5R 2E3

Or visit our website at www.humanefood.ca