

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 during egg laying. These wire cages are so small 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 year of confinement, their only release is slaughter.

About 95% of Canada’s 26 million laying hens are kept in cages.

LIFE SENTENCE ON THE FACTORY FARM

Hens are kept in crowded and cramped battery cages, which hold 5-7 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 may peck each other's feathers, or they may cannibalize one another. To prevent this, they are debeaked. Part of the bird's beak is sliced with a hot knife 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 lay up to 300 eggs 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.



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

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, 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 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;
- 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 or reducing feed for mature hens to spike egg production is called forced molting. It is not practice in Canada and starving hens is no longer common in the U.S. though some U.S. producers practice a reduced feed molt. 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, 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. In Ontario, the catchers pack them into transport “drawers.” Chicken catchers work so quickly they cannot treat each hen with care. Many hens suffer broken legs and wings in the process (Turner & Lymbery, 1999).

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 for slaughter. These birds 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

In some provinces, spent hens are suspended upside down by their feet in metal shackles at the start of the slaughter process. The procedure must induce fear as well as seriously aggravate the pain of osteoporosis and injuries from catching.

In Ontario, most spent hens are now rendered unconscious in CO2 gas while in “drawers”, then they are shackled and killed by whirled blades which cut the hens’ necks. Their depleted bodies are used for chicken hot dogs and other cooked meats.

In some provinces, spent hens are gassed and their bodies composted.

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), 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 has inherent severe disadvantages for the welfare of hens." In 2004, European Union legislation made it mandatory for eggs to be labeled according to method of production. The following terms apply:



A free range farm in British Columbia

- 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.”

Switzerland, Sweden, Belgium, Austria and the Netherlands have banned battery cages. In 2015, California prohibited the use of battery cages.

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