



FACTS ABOUT OUR FOOD

~BROILER CHICKENS~

Chickens raised on today's factory farms are bred for fast growth and large size. The result is that birds suffer immensely from physical anomalies and deformities.

OVERVIEW

“Broilers” are birds specially bred for efficient meat production. The goal is to grow the biggest bird in the shortest time for the lowest cost. The average “broiler” chicken is raised inside a large industrial barn in groups of 5,000 to 50,000 birds. Chickens are mass-housed on the floor in crowded, barren buildings with automatic feeders and water stations. Birds have been genetically selected for rapid growth, causing physical and crippling disorders. Birds are subjected to lighting abuse and they are slaughtered after mere 32-34 days of life. In 2012, over 643 million chickens were slaughtered in Canada.

LIFE SENTENCE ON THE FACTORY FARM

Genetic Selection

In 1950, in Canada it took 84 days for a broiler chicken to reach the market weight of 1.36 kg, but today, it takes only 32-34 days to produce a 2 kg bird. The spectacular growth rate of broiler chickens has been achieved mainly through breeding for growth in muscle, plus routine use of growth promoting drugs and antibiotics. In addition to acting as a growth-promotant, antibiotics help keep these immune-compromised birds alive for long enough to grow to slaughter weight.

Physical Ailments

Broiler chickens suffer from leg and skeletal deformities. Because the birds develop muscle faster than regular birds, their legs cannot support their weight. Proper bone mineralization sometimes does not occur causing crippling and painful bending of the birds' bones. Chickens may become lame, virtually unable to move. Additionally, growing too heavy for their limbs, they become distorted in shape with unnatural stress being placed on their joints. Chickens spend more and more time just sitting as they approach slaughter weight. This inactivity is linked to chronic joint pain.

Heart attacks are another problem among broiler chickens. Rapid muscle growth causes problems for the bird's heart and lungs, which have difficulty moving oxygenated blood to the tissues, resulting in a disorder known as ascites. Ascites can lead to a slow and miserable death.

Young, rapidly growing broiler chickens die from a number of causes, including Acute Death Syndrome, or Flip-over Syndrome, which is a heart attack. The bird squawks, falls over and dies.

LIFE IN THE BARN

Crowding - Broiler chickens live in extremely crowded, barren environments. By slaughter, each bird has only a half-square foot (465 sq cm) of space. That's less than the size of a computer mouse pad. These barren and confining conditions deny animals the opportunity to express natural behaviours, and lead to physical and behavioural problems. There is social chaos as thousands of chickens crammed into one barn, with too many birds for a well-defined pecking order to develop. Normal behaviour patterns are impossible. Individuals become stressed and aggressive to neighbours.

Litter Burn & Foul Air - Massive amounts of manure accumulate in the floor litter from the thousands of birds during their six-week life. The birds suffer litter burn from the high moisture and ammonia content of the manure on the floor. Litter quality deteriorates, as do air quality, which becomes polluted with ammonia, dust and micro-organisms, causing respiratory infections and sores.

Lighting Abuse – Broiler house lighting is constantly manipulated to stimulate higher food consumption and faster weight gain, with lights kept on up to 23 hours straight. Upset circadian cycles cause distress, which humans know as jet lag.

BREEDING

“Broiler breeders”, the parent birds kept to produce fertilized eggs for broiler chickens, suffer a horribly deprived life. The breeder birds are selected to produce fast-growing offspring but in order to keep the parent birds' weight manageable, they are food-deprived and constantly hungry. The birds have their beaks seared off with a hot blade to prevent them pecking each other from the stress of hunger and overcrowding.

The males have their toes, spurs and combs cut off and, in some cases, implants in their nasal cavities to prevent them from eating the females' food.

TRANSPORTATION

Newborn chicks may be transported up to 72 hours to broiler sheds without food or water.

When broilers reach 32-34 days of age, they are grabbed by their feet, seven at a time, held upside-down and loaded into crates by “chicken catchers”, who work so quickly they cannot treat each bird with care. Many chickens, which are already lame, suffer broken legs or wings or bruising during this stressful procedure. Automated catching methods would be more humane.

In Canada, chickens are exposed for many hours to variations of weather, from winter blizzards to summer heat waves. In hot weather, crowded birds can suffocate, and in winter birds freeze to death. Pain in already-damaged limbs is an added stress. The length of journey contributes to the stress and lethality of transport. Chickens may be legally transported up to 36 hours without being fed or watered according to regulations under the Health of Animals Act.

SLAUGHTER

On arrival at the kill plant, birds can be forced to wait hours, still in their crates, until it is their turn for slaughter.

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

Improper Stunning - After being shackled upside-down, chickens are supposed to be rendered unconscious by immersion in an electrified water stun bath prior to having their throats cut. Stunning is followed by a mechanical neck cutting machine and ends with immersion in scalding water to loosen their feathers. However, not all birds are properly stunned. Birds not stunned in the water bath feel their throats being slit, and some get to the scalding water bath while fully conscious. A more stress-free killing method is Controlled Atmosphere Killing, which is administering a lethal dose of inert gas, which would eliminate additional stressful handling as the birds are gassed while still in the crates/drawers.

INDUSTRY TRENDS

Larger Flock Sizes

More birds are being produced in ever-smaller spaces. In the future, larger flock sizes per grower are anticipated, as are adoption of mechanized handling and housing. Animal science research typically focuses on production improvements, not on improving living conditions for farmed animals.

Shorter Production Time

The time for chickens to reach market weight has decreased continues to decrease and the trend is expected to continue. As it stands, the birds are so young when slaughtered, they are not even fully feathered.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

There is clear evidence factory-farmed broiler chickens suffer tremendously. The **Canadian Coalition for Farm Animals** is working to end this cruelty. You can help make a difference.

- Don't buy factory-farmed chicken meat. Choose free-range chickens that are *Certified Organic* or have a label like BCSPCA Certified. These chickens are produced in higher-welfare systems where they can behave more naturally.
- Eliminate or reduce the amount of chicken you eat and replace with plant-based foods. There are many available options such as tofu, beans and meat-replacements.
- Ask your local grocery store to stock alternatives to factory-farmed chicken, and to ensure that these alternatives are clearly labelled.
- Write to the Minister of Agriculture asking that Canada get rid of its antiquated and cruel method of slaughter and switch to controlled atmosphere killing (CAK). This method would require less rough handling of the chickens, as they would be exposed to an inert, quick and relatively painless death while still in their transport crates/drawers.

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