

Layer Hen Factsheet

Social Structures:

Chickens are social creatures whose lives are determined by 'the pecking order'. Hens in wild or farmed populations have a strict social hierarchy which is governed by the most dominant hen - usually the strongest and healthiest bird in the flock. It is their job to protect the flock from predators and keep the other hens in line - usually with a strong stare and a swift, sharp peck. When introducing a new hen to a managed flock, care should be taken as this can upset the harmony of the established pecking order. Chickens in the wild can live for up to 11 years in flocks of up to 30 individuals.

Natural Behaviours:

Chickens have a keen foraging instinct and spend most of their time in the wild scratching and pecking the ground in search of seeds and insects. Chickens also take great care to preen their feathers, removing any parasites and keeping their feathers and skin in tip-top condition. One method of preening is called dust-bathing and involves the hen digging a shallow wallow where they roll and shake their feathers, covering them in fine, dry dust. This is an important behaviour for chickens and provides for their physical and mental wellbeing. It can therefore cause a great deal of stress if the opportunity to dust-bath is not available when hens are kept in captivity. Roosting on a perch is also an important part of a hen's life, providing a feeling of safety and security away from predation when trying to sleep. Chickens are extremely vocal with around 25 distinct calls that communicate a variety of meanings such as stress, excitement, and danger. A newborn chick can even communicate with its mother through the shell of its egg! Egg laying is a natural instinct that usually takes around 30 minutes. During this time, the hen will settle in a quiet nest away from other individuals.

Goodhearted Hen Care:

At our sanctuary, our hens are fully free range. They are kept in secure pens overnight which have constant access to an outside area with plenty of space, food, water, perches and enrichment opportunities. In the day they have free range of the sanctuary and can often be seen dust-bathing in the barn or scratching in the soil for tasty insects. We health-check our chickens regularly and keep an eye on their social hierarchy to make sure that no individual hen is being bullied by more dominant birds.



Carol was rescued from the egg-laying industry in 2019 with the help of the British Hen Welfare Trust.

Did you know that layer hens may on average produce just over 300 eggs per year? In the wild, chickens may only lay between 15-20 eggs per year during the breeding season.



Our flock is made up of female hens and one male rooster called Magnus. We are unable to keep multiple cockerels together as this would result in male-male aggression and even death in some cases. Our hens continue to lay eggs which we cook (shell on) and feed back to our chickens as a means of replenishing the calcium that the hens lose during the process of continuous egg laying. Any new hens are quarantined prior to being introduced to the existing flock to prevent any unwanted disease transmission.

Laying hens in UK Agriculture:

A hen is moved to an egg laying production facility when she is around 16 weeks old. She will stay in this facility until she is around 1.5 years old when her egg production starts to decline and she is prepared for slaughter.

There are three main types of facility in the UK:

- Caged systems
- Barn systems
- Free range and organic systems

The good news is that consumers can make educated choices when it comes to purchasing eggs because these products have to be clearly labelled with details of the rearing facility. The bad news is that often many consumers are unaware of the welfare concerns involved in rearing hens for egg production. We'll take a closer look at these in more detail below.

Caged systems: (48% of UK egg production)

Up until 2012, caged systems were made up of barren battery cages which housed 10 birds with a floor space of just one A4 sheet of paper. These cages were poorly ventilated and had no access to natural light. Since 2012, the 1999 Laying Hens Directive has prohibited the use of conventional battery cages, instead opting for so-called 'enriched cages'. These cages are very similar to conventional battery cages with slightly more floor space (600cm squared as opposed to 550cm squared per

Laying hens in UK Agriculture (continued):

hen), an area for 'nesting', and the opportunity for birds to perch. A battery cage system involves keeping several birds together in a wire cage which is linked to hundreds, sometimes thousands of other cages, most of which have no access to natural light or sufficient ventilation. These cramped conditions are also strongly linked to increased rates of stress and disease transmission which we will look at in more detail below.

Barn systems: (1% of UK egg production)

Laying hens within barn systems are not caged and are able to move around. This description can be misleading though, as actually the barns are tightly stocked with birds leaving little space to move freely. There are opportunities for the birds to perch, dust bath and nest but these areas are usually occupied by the more dominant individuals of the flock, leaving no opportunity for the lower ranking birds to get involved. According to the EU Welfare of Laying Hens Directive there should be no more than 9 hens per square metre and perches should allow 15cm of perch per hen. Artificial lighting is used to replicate the light of day.

Free range systems: (51% of UK egg production)

In free range systems the hens have access to an outdoor area along with an aviary with opportunities to roost. In theory, all hens in these systems have the chance to carry out their natural behaviours such as wing flapping, scratching and dust bathing. Sometimes these opportunities may be hindered by the high stocking density present in the aviary, preventing birds from accessing any outdoor space. An area of 4 square metres of outside space is allocated per hen in a free range system, increasing to 10 square metres in an organic system.

Layer hens around the world:

There are 6.6 billion layer hens around the world, producing over 1 trillion eggs each year. Total global egg production is 65 million tonnes per annum. China is the world's greatest producer of eggs, accounting for around one third of global egg production. In the UK alone, 11 billion eggs are laid each year. Despite this, the UK imports around 1500 eggs each year. The UK exports around 270 million eggs per year.



Our hens play an important role in our animal assisted therapy programme working with children with disabilities. With their unique and quirky personalities our hens make brilliant companions for those who may struggle interacting with larger animals.

Welfare Concerns:

Animal welfare is based on three main components (below) and when these become compromised, that can have a direct impact on the quality of that animal's life.

- Physical wellbeing
- Mental wellbeing
- Natural living

Layer hens face a variety of significant welfare concerns in UK and global farming systems, most of which are exacerbated in the cramped conditions found in caged systems in particular. Despite 'enriched' cages being furnished with low perches and an area for nesting, in reality these areas are dominated by the highest ranking birds and are fiercely defended with sharp pecks and signs of aggression. This means that lower ranking birds have no chance of carrying out their natural instinctive behaviours, leading to stress and anxiety. In addition, these very cramped conditions mean that birds cannot evade bullying behaviour from other hens meaning that they often suffer from extreme feather loss and injurious pecking, on top of greater risk of disease transmission between hens and even to humans (salmonella contamination).

To overcome the problem of excessive feather plucking and injurious pecking, farmers typically carry out a process called 'de-beaking' or beak trimming. In the UK, this process involves removing the tip of the hen's beak when she is still a chick using an infra-red beam. Anesthetic is not used and the process is inevitably painful. Elsewhere in Europe it is commonplace to significantly trim the beak back, resulting in the hen experiencing pain whenever she tries to feed.

On the right you can see an example of excessive beak trimming which will undoubtedly cause the bird pain and discomfort whenever she feeds.



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Welfare concerns:

Due to the extremely high volume of eggs that the hens have been selectively bred to produce over many years, the hens are much more susceptible to suffering from calcium depletion resulting in brittle bones and osteoporosis. It can also lead to problems later in life, as we have experienced with our rescued battery hens at Goodheart, such as egg yolk peritonitis. This is a condition when the egg yolk is produced but does not form an egg for laying; instead it becomes trapped in the abdominal cavity where it can lead to a secondary bacterial infection and even death if not quickly treated.



At Goodheart Farm Sanctuary, our hens have free range with plenty of outdoor space meaning they can choose when they wish to interact with other hens and even humans. Our hens can dust bath, fly to tall perches to roost, and find quiet, safe places to build their own nests.

What can you do to help?

If you are concerned by anything that you have read in this factsheet, you may be wondering what you can do to help. The only way that you can be sure that you are not contributing to the exploitation of layer hens is by cutting out all animal products from your lifestyle; including chicken meat and eggs. This way, you can be sure that you are not condoning animal cruelty in the form of beak trimming, male chick maceration, or cramped and stressful living conditions. Even if you are unable to cut these products out of your lifestyle entirely, taking steps to reduce your consumption will also help to lower the demand for these products. Be mindful to avoid eggs used to produce secondary food products such as mayonnaise and cakes. You may also wish to sign [this petition](#) which campaigns to end keeping any animal in a caged system. If you do continue to eat eggs, try to source them from local, pet hens that have not been subjected to cruelty.



Check out our sources:

- [1] <https://www.ciwf.org.uk/farm-animals/chickens/>
- [2] <https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/farm/layinghens>
- [3] https://www.rspca.org.uk/documents/1494939/7712578/Laying+hens+Information+Sheet_August+2018.pdf/9587893b-64b5-ee56-73b9-6b82a1081340?t=1553271755453&download=true
- [4] <https://www.egginfo.co.uk/egg-facts-and-figures/production/barn-egg#:~:text=In%20the%20barn%20system%20hens%20are%20able%20to,account%20for%20one%20third%20of%20the%20ground%20surface.>
- [5] <https://www.ciwf.org.uk/media/3818829/alternatives-to-the-barren-battery-cage-in-the-eu.pdf>
- [6] <https://www.bhwt.org.uk/hen-health/health-problems/egg-yolk-peritonitis/>
- [7] <https://www.bhwt.org.uk/beak-trimming/>
- [8] <https://www.ciwf.org.uk/media/5235021/Statistics-Laying-hens.pdf>
- [9] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/930487/eggs-statsnotice-29oct20.pdf

The fate of male chicks:

After hatching, chicks are sorted by their sex. Females will be sent to a rearing unit until they reach laying age. As males are unable to lay eggs and are difficult to rear together due to male-male aggression, they are deemed worthless to the egg industry. At present, male chicks in the UK can be killed either through asphyxiation using inert gases (such as argon) or maceration (using a high speed meat grinder). This hidden truth of the egg industry raises not only welfare concerns for the animals involved, but also strong ethical concerns. Is this practice morally acceptable? At Goodheart, we don't think so. Despite this, the killing of male chicks is acceptable in all farming systems, even organic and even those that are 'RSPCA Assured' meaning that animal cruelty is unavoidable even in higher welfare farming systems.

