

Egg Production in Canada

The Life of an Egg-Laying Hen

In BC, more than 2 million hens are raised for egg production each year.

Chicks are hatched at hatcheries where the male and females are separated soon after hatching. Female chicks are kept at the hatchery for up to 2 days where they are vaccinated against diseases that can affect the species. Male chicks of egg-laying breeds are of little economic value as they will not produce eggs, and, due to genetics, grow much slower than breeds of chickens raised for meat. As a result, they are all killed after hatching.

Female chicks are either transported directly to the farm or, more commonly, to a pullet grower who rears the chickens until they reach approximately 19 weeks of age, at which time the pullets are transported to the farm.



The average hen will begin laying eggs at between 18 - 20 weeks of age (depending on the season and the breed of hen that is raised). Over a period of one year, a hen will lay approximately 320 eggs, or one egg every seven out of 8 days. This level of egg production represents a significant increase over what the ancestors of these modern strains of hens produced, and is the result of genetic selection.

After laying eggs for nearly one year, a hen's egg production declines, as does the quality of the egg shell and contents, and the hen is considered "spent". On most farms in Canada, one-year-old hens are taken to slaughter. As such, a hen's life span on-farm is much shorter than her natural life expectancy of 5 - 11 years.

In some countries, egg laying hens at one year of age may instead be "force to molt" to extend their laying capacity into a second or third cycle. This process involves withholding or reducing feed and light for up to 18 days and attempts to mimic natural molting - a process whereby chickens grow a new set of feathers. Natural molting is stimulated by the reduction in day length that occurs in the fall combined with any kind of stress to the chicken, and is associated with a sharp decline in egg production. The chicken's reproductive tract is rejuvenated during the molt, and the hen will again begin to lay eggs, albeit at a somewhat reduced level.

The artificial lighting provided to chickens on most commercial farms prevents the hens from molting naturally, so some farmers induce it by lowering the light and using the withdrawal of food as the stressor. Most people agree that forced moulting is an unacceptable practice as it denies the birds the food and light they require. Forced moulting is not commonly done in Canada and is stipulated as an unacceptable practice in Canada's Recommended Codes of Practice for the Care and Handling of Pullets, Layers and Spent Fowl.

Once the hens reach the end of their laying cycle, the entire flock is removed all at once so that the barn can be disinfected and left vacant for a downtime of at least 7 days before a new flock of chicks or pullets is placed on the farm. The meat from egg laying breeds is considered to be of low quality and is not generally used for human consumption.

The Welfare of Battery-Caged Hens

Conventional Battery Cages are small barren cages used to house egg-laying hens. These housing systems provide access to feed and water and droppings fall through the wire cage floor onto a belt or into a pit for disposal. The space provided for each hen varies across farms but generally 3 or more birds are housed in each cage and cages are stacked on top of each other.



Physical Comfort: There is broad consensus that the physical comfort of birds in conventional battery cages is poor. For example, hens can experience chronic pain associated with injuries to their feet caused by standing on the wire floor of the cages. Another source of pain may come at the time of catching and transport: studies show that hens in battery cages have weak bones, due in part to lack of movement and are therefore more susceptible to bone fractures at catching and during transport.

Emotional Well-being: Birds in battery cages are less likely to experience fear because they are in a small stable group of hens and predation is not an issue. However, much research suggests that hens in conventional cages experience severe frustration due to their confinement in these barren environments and their inability to nest when laying an egg. When we observe modern strains of hens around the time of egg-laying, we see behaviours symptomatic of frustration, including pacing and increased aggression.

Ability to perform natural behaviours: These cages severely restrict freedom of movement - the cages are barren and too small to allow the hens to perform important movements they are strongly motivated to perform, including grooming, wing flapping, perching and nest building.

Beak Trimming:

Beak trimming is routinely performed on flocks for the commercial production. This is a painful procedure that involves removing a portion of the beak using either a blade (hot or cold) or a laser and is performed within the first week of life.

Catching and Transport:

Due in part to the lack of exercise caged hens can engage in, their bones are weak and brittle making them susceptible to painful fractures of the wings and legs as they are pulled from the cages at the end of their laying cycle. In fact, studies show that 20 per cent of caged hens suffer broken bones after being removed from cages and transported - this equates to more than 400,000 hens who suffer from these injuries each year in BC alone.

