

# Broiler Hen Factsheet goodheart animal sanctuaries



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## Social Structures:

In their natural surroundings, hens live together as a flock and because of their social nature they look out for not only their families but for other hens in their group. Hens have a distinct hierarchy and pecking order and all know their place on the social ladder. Some are gregarious and fearless whilst others are shy and watchful. A dominant hen will assert itself through pecking quite viciously which can even lead to fighting should the other hen not back down. The most dominant hens have priority over access to food and nesting locations. A broody hen who has laid eggs rarely leaves her nest and after an incubation period of around 21 days, her chicks will hatch. The average lifespan for a wild hen is six years or more although there have been cases of hens living for 20 years.

## Natural Behaviours:

Chickens are very inquisitive animals whose cognitive abilities are very similar to dogs, cats and even some primates. In their natural environment, hens spend a lot of their time foraging for food. Their natural behaviours involve stretching, flapping their wings, scratching, pecking and preening. Hens love dust baths. Having a dust bath helps to ward off parasites and also helps maintain feather insulation. They also enjoy making nests out of materials such as twigs, feathers and leaves.

Chickens have around 25 distinct vocalisations, each associated with a different meaning and feeling such as distress, happiness, or warning of danger. Mother hens talk to their unborn babies and the unborn babies chirp back at them through their shells. In the wild, hens can navigate using the sun. This can aid them in their search for water and food. Despite being labelled as 'bird brained', chickens may be smarter than you think. Chickens can distinguish up to around 100 faces of their own species as well as having full colour vision just like us. They are passionate parents, and will fiercely protect their young from predators. Chickens also have the ability to dream while they sleep, just like us.

## 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. 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



The rescued chickens at Goodheart have free range of the sanctuary and can often be found dustbathing in the straw.

Did you know that chickens can live up to 20 years in the right environment? Sadly, broiler hens are killed at just 6-8 weeks old.



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.

## Broiler hens in UK Agriculture:

In 2017, in the UK, approximately 1.1 billion chickens were slaughtered which produced around 1.6 million tonnes of chicken meat. The UK export around 1.9% of their chicken to other countries.

### There are three main types of facility in the UK:

- Intensive industrial systems
- Higher welfare indoor systems
- Free range and organic systems

Globally, over 70% of chickens raised for their meat are kept using intensive industrial farming methods. A 2007 EU directive on broiler chickens allows the equivalent of 19 birds per square metre, which results in each bird having less floor space than an A4 sheet of paper.

### Intensive industrial systems:

Broiler hens have their eggs removed immediately and they are placed in an incubator in a hatchery for 21 days until they hatch. The day old chicks are put into huge, overcrowded, dimly lit sheds holding tens of thousands of hens with no access to the outside and often no natural light. They leave at 36-42 days for slaughter. The sheds can become extremely hot and should the ventilation systems fail, thousands of chickens can die due to heat stress.

The floors of the sheds are covered in litter to absorb droppings and are only cleaned when the chickens are sent for slaughter. The chickens' eyes and respiratory systems can be damaged by the ammonia from the droppings and the chickens are prone to developing painful burns on their chest and feet called hock burns.

Because of the speed that intensively reared chickens grow, they spend much of their time lying down as their legs aren't

## Broiler hens in UK Agriculture (continued):

strong enough to hold the weight of their heavy bodies. This can also cause painful leg disorders. They can also suffer fatigue due to the strain put on their heart and lungs because of rapid growth.

## Higher Welfare Indoor Systems:

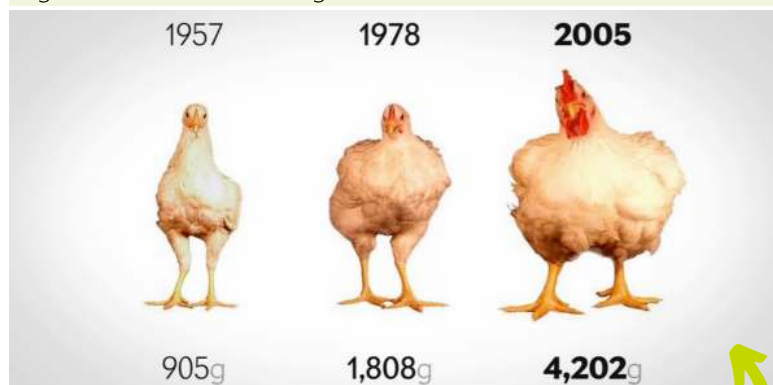
This system, despite being nearly identical to a standard intensive system, is classed as higher welfare due to a slightly larger allowance for space per bird as well as the presence of straw. In higher welfare systems, birds are allocated one square metre per 12-14 chickens and there is access to natural light. The presence of straw bales also encourages natural behaviours such as perching and wing flapping.

## Free range systems:

These systems allow the chickens to have continuous daytime access (for at least half of their life) to an outdoor range and are able to go inside the sheds at night. According to EU rules, each chicken must have one square metre of outdoor space. Free range broiler chickens live longer and grow slower than intensively farmed ones, living at least 56 days. Growing slower and being able to exercise means they have better heart and leg health and a higher quality of life, despite its short lifetime, as opposed to intensively reared individuals.

Organic systems allow the chickens to have access to the outdoors for at least a third of their life. They have at least 4 square metres of space outdoors and are commonly grown at half the rate of intensively farmed chickens, living for at least 81 days before slaughter. They are able to exercise and forage and have a significantly higher quality of life than intensively bred broilers.

Despite this, it is important to remember that animal suffering is present in all types of farming systems, including those classed as 'higher welfare' such as organic farms.



Broiler hen weight at 56 days old. Modern broilers are significantly larger due to intense artificial selection.



Broiler hens have been subjected to intensive artificial selection over a number of decades resulting in very fast-growing birds who suffer from a number of physical problems during their short lifespan.

## Global farming of broiler hens:

Over 66 billion chickens are slaughtered for meat each year around the world.



In 2017, there was over 109 million tonnes of chicken meat produced globally due to the slaughter of 66.5 million chickens.

The United States is the largest producer of chicken by weight, globally, with over 9 million chickens reared in 2017 accounting for just over 17% of the market. They export around 16% of their production to other countries.

Brazil is the second highest producer by weight, at 13 million tonnes of chicken meat in 2017 (5,842,721 chickens) and export 30.4%, followed closely by China who produced 12 million tonnes (9,400,621 chickens).

In the EU, the top 5 broiler chicken meat producing countries are Poland, France, the UK, Germany and Spain.

## Welfare concerns for broiler hens:

**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

Broiler hens in intensive farming systems are most at risk of developing the following problems, but even birds in higher welfare systems continue to suffer due to their unnaturally large size. Commercial broilers are bred to grow as fat as possible and reports have found that over 100,000 birds die every day in Britain of heart failure or disease because of intensive farming methods. Due to their body weight and not being able to walk, many die of starvation or dehydration.

# Broiler Hen Factsheet

## Welfare concerns:

### De-beaking:

It is virtually impossible for a chicken to find its spot in the pecking order when reared under intensive farming conditions. Because of this, some frustrated chickens often peck at one another relentlessly causing injury or even death. They must also compete for food and water which can lead to aggressive behaviour even resulting in cannibalism. To overcome this, farmers will remove the tip of a chicken's beak using an infrared laser when it is just a few days old, with no anesthetic at all. Done too severely this can cause open wounds, leading to bleeding from the beak and cause pain to the chicken especially when trying to eat.



Beak tipped hen at 72 weeks



Non-tipped hen at same age

### Food pad dermatitis:

A common condition in broiler hens where painful lesions develop on the underside of the chicken's feet. This can be the result of them having to stand on wet litter.



### Hock burns:

The hock is the upper joint of the chicken's legs. Hock burns occur when the ammonia within chicken waste burns through the skin. This can be very uncomfortable and lead to lack of mobility.



### Conditions in the barn and in transit:

Birds are at risk of dying due to overheating, dehydration and disease.



Broiler chickens are packed into crates for transport to slaughter using either a catching machine or by hand and can suffer broken bones and bruising. Approximately 20 million chickens per year are already dead by the time they arrive at an EU slaughterhouse.



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.

At Goodheart we believe in the power that individual consumers have to make positive change for animals. The only way that you can be sure that you are not contributing to the exploitation of broiler 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 involved in the production of these products. Even if you are unable to cut these products out of your lifestyle entirely, taking steps to reduce your consumption and choosing higher welfare systems wherever possible will also help to lower the demand for intensively reared animals.

You may also wish to lend your support to the following campaigns which aim to increase the welfare standards for chickens in particular:

- Compassion in World Farming: [End the Cage Age - Campaigning against animals that are farmed in cages](#)
- World Animal Protection: [Change for chickens](#)
- Animal Equality: [Help Hens](#)



## Check out our sources:



- [1] <https://www.ciwf.org.uk/farm-animals/>
- [2] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/poultry-on-farm-welfare/broiler-meat-chickens-welfare-recommendations>
- [3] <https://www.peta.org.uk/blog/21-surprising-facts-about-chickens>
- [4] <https://animalcorner.org/animals/chickens>
- [5] <https://www.worldanimalprotection.org.uk/blogs/10-facts-why-we-need-change-for-chickens>
- [6] [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/936501/poultry-statsnotice-19Nov20.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/936501/poultry-statsnotice-19Nov20.pdf)