

[Report animal cruelty](#)[Media centre](#)[Blog](#)[About us](#)[Contact us](#)

Search

[WHAT WE DO](#)[SUPPORT US](#)[TAKE ACTION](#)[THE FACTS](#)[ADOPT A PET](#)[Home](#)[Layer Hen FAQ](#)

Layer Hen FAQ

Contents

[Layer Hens](#) | [Egg Production Systems in Australia](#) | [How Can I Help](#) | [Other Interesting Facts](#) | [Egg Facts](#)

Layer Hens

How many layer hens are there in Australia?

There are approximately 16 million layer hens in Australia, 9 million of which are housed in battery cages.

How many eggs are produced in Australia each year?

Approximately 421 million dozen eggs are laid in Australia each year.

How many eggs do hens produce each year?

On average hens produce approximately 300 eggs each year.

How do layer hens in Australia live?

Commercial hens that produce the vast majority of eggs are farmed in three different ways in Australia. These are known as '[production systems](#)' and include cage, barn and free-range systems.

What's the typical lifecycle of a commercial layer hen?

Hens in commercial systems will live for around 72 weeks until they are considered 'spent'.

How intelligent are hens anyway?

Hens are much more intelligent than you might think. Hens are social animals and need to be able to communicate easily with each other. Hens have over 20 different calls, including two distinct alarm calls to warn their flock about approaching predators. Aerial (flying) predators such as hawks and eagles will cause hens to give a different alarm call than ground predators, and the birds react differently to each call. When hens hear an aerial alarm call they run for cover, crouch down and look upwards; when they hear a ground alarm call they actively look around them for signs of danger. Hens also use calls to communicate with each other about food. Studies on hens have indicated that they can interpret the meaning of individual calls and can use calls to show their intention when

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communicating with each other.

Hens have a complex nervous system that includes a prodigious memory and the ability to make complex decisions. Researchers who have studied the behaviour of hens are clear that battery cages can in no way meet the demands of such remarkable animals. Hens in battery cages have little opportunity for decision-making or control over their own lives. They have no access to materials for performing natural behaviours including foraging, dust bathing or nesting. In the absence of these opportunities, hens are forced to find abnormal ways of coping without them. What the science tells us is that layer hens deserve much better than to be forced to endure their lifetime in a barren battery cage.

What happens when hens stop producing eggs?

Although hens have a natural lifespan of up to 12 years, their ability to produce eggs declines at around 72 weeks of age and as a result, commercial hens of this age are considered less profitable.

Sometimes commercial hens are put through a process of 'forced moulting' which extends their ability to produce eggs. Moulting is a natural process, allowing hens' bodies to rest and rebuild bone strength. In commercial systems however, moulting is carried out using feed withdrawal or non-feed withdrawal methods. Particularly for those birds that have feed withdrawn (for a period up to 2 weeks), forced moulting is a serious welfare issue. Where feed isn't withdrawn, the bird's diet is changed to a feed low in energy and protein. Both methods cause a marked reduction in body weight but also re-invigorate egg production.

What's a spent hen?

A hen is declared 'spent' when her egg production drops at around 72 weeks of age. At this point she is considered less profitable and removed from the production system.

The process of removing 'spent' hens is known as 'depopulation' where hens are manually caught by human 'catchers' (up to 5 hens per hand) and placed into crates ready for transport.

There can be welfare issues during depopulation. For example, time pressures and rough handling often lead to injuries such as bone fractures. Fracture rates tend to be higher in battery cages during depopulation, mainly because of the risks and difficulties involved in removing birds through narrow cage doors. Due to lack of exercise, birds in battery cages also have weaker bones than birds from alternative systems and their legs or wings may snap.

So if layer hens are female, what happens to the male chicks?

Following an incubation period of 21 days, chicks hatch and their sex is determined when they are one day old. Sexing chicks requires considerable skill and is done at this very early stage to determine their fate.

It's only the female chicks that will become commercial layers and produce the eggs we eat. The male chicks are considered an unwanted by-product of egg production and are killed and disposed of shortly after birth.

Male chicks are killed for two reasons: firstly they can't lay eggs and

secondly they aren't suitable for chicken-meat production. Remember layer hens - and therefore their chicks - are a different breed of poultry to chickens that are bred and raised for meat production. [Learn more about male chicks in the egg industry.](#)

[Back to top](#)

Egg Production Systems in Australia

How many hens live in cages compared to other systems?

Two-thirds of hens in Australia are in battery cages, while one-third are housed in cage-free systems, including free range and barn laid systems.

What is a battery cage?

Over 9 million hens live in battery ('conventional') cages - this is around two-thirds of Australia's hens.

They are known as 'battery' cages because of the way they are stacked above one another. A single shed can contain up to 100,000 hens.

Hens in battery cages spend their entire lives in a metal cage, and typically share their space with three to seven other hens.

Each hen is only allowed the space of less than an A4 sheet of paper.

Modern cage facilities have automated feed and watering systems, ventilation and lighting. Manure and eggs are collected via conveyor belt systems.

Basic normal behaviours including perching, nesting, foraging, dust bathing and stretching or flapping their wings aren't available to hens in battery cages.

Why are cages bad for hens?

There's overwhelming evidence that the needs of layer hens can't be met in battery cages. Restrictions on bird movement in battery cages means hens suffer greatly both mentally and physically.

When confined to battery cages, hens are unable to express their most basic natural behaviours, including walking, flying, stretching, perching, nesting and dust bathing - behaviours that make a hen, a hen. Physical problems caused by cages include feather loss, foot problems, brittle bones and weak muscles. Hens also have no escape from aggression, feather pecking and cannibalism.

The RSPCA acknowledges that there are advantages and disadvantages for each of the production systems. However, battery cages will never address the behavioural needs of layer hens, will always have restrictions and adverse effects on bird movement, social interactions and behaviour, and therefore cannot provide good welfare.

What's the RSPCA doing about hens in battery cages?

The RSPCA aims to make people aware that all animals used by humans must be treated humanely and compassionately. For many years the RSPCA has been campaigning against battery cages in egg production.

The RSPCA is currently taking part in the development of the Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for Poultry, which are being

created to replace the existing *Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals: Domestic Poultry*. These new standards will be legally enforceable, and are intended to guide the development of consistent animal welfare legislation across all states and territories. Poultry welfare standards are not reviewed regularly or often; the Model Code of Practice was published back in 2002, and it is safe to say that it will be a long time before the new Standards and Guidelines are revisited. That's why it's crucial to take this opportunity to improve the welfare of layer hens by pushing for improvement to the Standards, and especially, for a legislated phase-out of battery cages now.

In addition to this, the RSPCA's Humane Food activities form part of RSPCA Australia's efforts in improving the welfare of farm production animals. RSPCA Australia is also working directly with producers and their production systems via the Approved Farming Scheme (www.rspcaapproved.org.au), the restaurant sector via [Choose Wisely](#)

It's important that consumers know where their food comes from and ask for higher welfare products when shopping and dining out.

Why haven't cages been banned in Australia before now?

RSPCA Australia and other animal welfare groups have worked concertedly for years to try to bring an end to the use of battery cages in Australia. In 1999 the Australian Government began a review into the housing of layer hens. The issue was intensely debated by the RSPCA and other animal welfare groups and the egg production industry. RSPCA Australia argued strongly and at every opportunity to phase out the use of battery cages in Australia. Sadly, despite the overwhelming evidence that hens suffer in cages, in 2000 the Council of State and Territory Agriculture Ministers (ARMCANZ) decided that cages would continue to be used for the foreseeable future. Some small improvements for caged hens came out of the 2000 ARMCANZ decision: to increase the floor space per hen from 450cm² to 550cm². This change applied to new cages installed after January 2001 and older cages that did not meet previous standards set in 1995. Many producers resisted even this tiny improvement but all States have now put this change into legislation.

If cages are cruel, why can't the RSPCA prosecute?

The RSPCA can only prosecute egg producers if they are breaking the law or contravening regulations that set minimum standards for battery cages. Farmers who provide their hens with the minimum 550cm² per bird cannot be prosecuted, even if the RSPCA believe this is a cruel practice. The RSPCA works both to enforce existing laws and to change laws to improve the welfare of animals. Getting hens out of battery cages is one of the RSPCA's key aims and includes putting our message across to politicians, farmers and other key decision makers, as well as raising public awareness of the issue.

What's a furnished or enriched cage?

'Enriched' or 'furnished' cages were developed as an alternative to the traditional battery cage system with the aim of providing more space and height, as well as additional provisions such as nests, litter, scratching pads (to help shorten claws), and perches allowing hens to display their natural behaviours.

Their size may vary, housing between 10 and 60 birds. A relatively new

system, these 'enriched' cages are found in the European Union, Canada and New Zealand, but aren't yet used widely in Australia.

What does the RSPCA think of furnished cages?

Furnished cages offer advantages over battery cages since more normal behaviours may be expressed. They also have some advantages over cage-free systems as they are easier to manage, and there is a lower risk of spreading infectious diseases. However, the RSPCA believes that despite 'enrichments' in furnished cages, problems persist. For example, there is not enough space to allow for a dust bath that is large and deep enough and has sufficient litter for all hens to access. Hens are unable to forage and scratch the ground, environmental complexity is limited which limits the hens' ability to explore their environment and forage, there may be competition between hens for the nest box if they want to lay their eggs at the same time, and the position of the perch may reduce the total area available to the birds.

What's a barn system?

In a barn system, hens aren't kept in cages but instead can move about in large sheds. Flock size varies between thousands and tens of thousands of birds in each shed.

Sheds are normally equipped with an automated feeding and watering system, and eggs are collected mechanically.

Hens in barn systems can carry out natural behaviours such as stretching and flapping their wings. All barns have nest boxes where hens can lay their eggs but not all barns have perches or litter. Some barns have slats or wire-mesh flooring which does not allow hens to forage, scratch the ground, dustbathe or perch.

Barn laid eggs are a good alternative to battery cage eggs. A well-managed barn can be just as welfare friendly for a hen as a proper free range facility. From an animal welfare perspective it's a myth that barn is second best. It's all about who is operating the system and to what standards they adhere.

Many eggs are now being marketed as cage-free. Essentially, if eggs are labelled cage-free they are barn laid.

The RSPCA approves some barn laid hen farms under the [RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme](#).

What's a free range system?

Conditions on free range farms vary greatly, but most importantly hens aren't confined to cages. In a well-managed free range system, hens should have access to an attractive outdoor area during the day as well as shade and protection. At night, large flocks of free range hens are usually kept in sheds or barns to keep them safe from predators, while smaller flocks may be kept in smaller, possibly moveable sheds.

Free range hens can dustbathe, scratch and forage, and lay their eggs in a nest. Some free range systems provide perches for hens to roost when they are inside at night.

The RSPCA believes it's important that layer hens in free range systems are well managed, have access to appropriate shelter, and are provided with a suitable range area which they readily use.

The RSPCA approves some free range hen farms under the [RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme](#).

What are the benefits of cage-free hen farming?

Higher welfare egg production systems such as barn and free range can improve welfare and provide opportunities for hens to express their most basic and natural behaviours such as perching, roosting, dust bathing, foraging and laying their eggs in a nest. Where stocking density is appropriate, these systems allow hens to stand properly, walk and stretch and/or flap their wings. These production systems also allow for improved bone strength.

What is the price difference to consumers between cage and cage-free eggs?

The overall price difference between cage and cage-free for consumers is minimal. It is approximately 15-20 cents per egg. So if you are buying a dozen eggs per week, switching to cage-free will cost less than a bottle of water each week.

Can farmers afford to get rid of cages?

We know that alternative systems work because many farmers are already using them. If consumers avoid cage eggs, farmers and supermarkets will respond to this.

Barn and free-range eggs can be more expensive for farmers. As such, consumers can be prepared to pay more for cage-free eggs because they cost more to produce. With cheap battery cage eggs, the hen is definitely paying the price.

The RSPCA believes this should be an area of focus for the Australian egg industry's research and development (R&D). The industry should be focussed on alternatives and further increasing the benefits of cage-free production.

What is happening in the rest of the world?

There are moves to get hens out of battery cages across the world. Many countries that have examined their animal welfare laws and the science on layer hen welfare have taken steps to phase-out battery cages. The leader in this area is the European Union (EU). Battery cages were phased out entirely throughout the European Union in 2012. Since then, all hens have had access to at least 750cm² of space, a nest, a perch, and litter for dust bathing and scratching. Battery cages have been banned in Switzerland (since 1992) and Germany (since 2012). In New Zealand, a legislative phase-out of battery cages began in 2012, despite battery cage eggs accounting for more than 80% of the country's egg production at that time. In February 2016, Canadian egg farmers committed to an industry-led phase-out of battery cages, with legislation since drafted mandating the phase-out (currently, 90% of Canadian layer hens are kept in battery cages). In the USA, several states have ended the use of battery cages. In the United States, the state of Michigan banned battery cages in 2009, Ohio in 2016, and similar legislation is proposed in Massachusetts. Nearly 100 major food companies in the US have stopped sourcing eggs from battery cages.

[Back to top](#)

How Can I Help?

What else can I do to help hens?

Thanks for choosing to make a difference. You've made the right decision!

There's heaps of ways you can help get hens out of cages see our [#endthebattery cage](#) campaign to find out how!

What eggs should I buy?

[Download our shopping guide](#) (.pdf 142kB) to know what to look for when you're in the supermarket aisle.

[Back to top](#)

Other Interesting Facts

Do we eat layer hens?

Layer hens are a totally different breed of bird to a meat chicken and are farmed to produce eggs rather than huge breast muscle.

Once a hen's egg production goes down, they are considered 'spent'. Spent hens are either killed on farm and composted, or transported to an abattoir for slaughter. Some of the meat from spent hens may be exported, while other options may include pet food, and lower-quality processing meat for human consumption (for example in soups and stocks.)

What's the difference between a layer hen and a meat chicken?

Layer hens and meat chickens are two different breeds of bird - grown for two different purposes. Layer hens are egg-laying specialists. Meat chickens are bred to produce meat.

Does the RSPCA want people to stop eating eggs?

No. The RSPCA's aim is to ensure the welfare of layer hens. The evidence demonstrates that it is simply not possible to provide for the needs of a layer hen in a battery cage. However, well-designed and managed alternative systems can provide for hens' needs. Our aim is to get hens out of battery cages.

I want hens at home - what do I do?

Check our Knowledge Base for all the information you need on the [type of house you should build for your backyard hens](#).

[Back to top](#)

Egg Facts

Why should people care about what eggs they are eating?

The RSPCA believes you can eat eggs and still care about the welfare of the hens that provided them. These animals are living, feeling creatures, capable of experiencing fear, pain and distress.

We think all animals, including layer hens, should be treated humanely, whether they're animals we eat, farm or live with as companions, including layer hens.

Where do eggs come from?

Australia's eggs come from layer hens that are housed in cage, barn or free-range system. Hens are bred to produce as many eggs as possible during their relatively short lives. It's the eggs these hens produce that are sold in supermarkets and used by restaurants and food manufacturers in many of the foods we eat.

Do cage-free eggs taste better than cage eggs?

While there's no scientific evidence to prove that eggs from different systems taste better, lots of chefs, foodies and cage-free supporters comment that cage-free eggs make a better dish and do taste better. In addition to this, just knowing that you're caring for the welfare of hens would surely make cage-free eggs taste better!

Why are some egg yolks brighter than others?

Yolk colour is influenced by the level of substances called carotenoids (preliminary forms of vitamin A) in a hen's diet. These substances have yellow and red pigmentation. Some of these carotenoids will be converted to vitamin A and used by the hen herself, whereas others will be stored in egg yolk where they not only contribute to yolk colour, but also have anti-oxidant properties and thus help to stabilise the vitamins contained within the yolk.

A diet lacking carotenoids will produce a colourless yolk. Natural forms of carotenoids (including lutein and zeaxanthin) can be found in feed such as corn, lucerne, and grass, however these levels can fluctuate. In order to ensure consistent yolk colouration, producers may add additional yellow and red carotenoids (such as apoester and canthaxanthin). Yolk colour does not affect the nutritional value of the egg, and is not influenced by the type of production system in which an egg is produced.

Why is there sometimes a red blood spot on the egg yolk?

The red spot sometimes found in eggs is also called a 'meat spot'. This spot is caused by a rupture of a blood vessel on the yolk surface during the egg's formation. As the egg ages, the yolk takes up water from the albumen to dilute the blood spot, so in actuality, if you see a blood spot, you know it's a very fresh egg, so you can still eat it.

What is a double yolk?

A double yolk is an egg which has two yolks.

In normal situations, an egg is formed through development and release of a single ovum (yolk sac) from a hen's ovary, which then travels down the oviduct. Once in the oviduct, albumin (egg white) and shell are deposited around the yolk to form a complete egg.

Double yolking occurs when two ova are released at the same time into the oviduct, and will become encased in albumin and shell together. This is more common in young birds, when their reproductive cycles are not yet completely synchronised.

[Back to top](#)

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- [The Facts](#)
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