

Chicken

How come it's so cheap?



Broiler chickens: the forgotten victims of factory farming

Most of the 4,000 million chickens reared each year in the EU for their meat are kept in severely overcrowded sheds and pushed to grow so quickly that many suffer from painful leg disorders and others die of heart failure.

EU laws are urgently needed to stop this suffering.



Forty years ago chicken was something special, a treat reserved for Sundays or special occasions.

Over the years its price has fallen dramatically and chicken is now an everyday food, with bargain prices encouraging ever greater consumption.

Broiler chickens are by far the most numerous of all farm animals. Each year over 800 million broilers are reared in the UK and 68 million are reared in the Republic of Ireland. The annual figure for the European Union (EU) as a whole is over 4,000 million. Nearly all are factory farmed. (Broilers are the chickens reared for their meat, not those kept to lay eggs).

From the hatchery, the birds are taken to the farm where they are packed into huge windowless sheds which can hold 30-40,000 chickens. As the birds grow bigger, conditions deteriorate and the sheds become so overcrowded that one can barely see the floor, so thickly is it 'carpeted' with chickens.



© Colin Seddon

The pile of dead birds outside this typical broiler shed are just some of the many who die on hot summer days from heat stress.



Usually when a product is so unexpectedly cheap, we know something shady is going on and that it's best not to ask too many questions. And so, consumers have chosen not to ask: **How is it that chicken's so cheap?**

But this booklet provides the answer: **Because the birds have gone from being reared free-range to being ruthlessly factory farmed. We've got our cheap chicken at the cost of an immense amount of animal suffering.**



© FAUNA - South Wales

Genetically selected for super-fast growth, many chickens suffer from painful leg deformities.

Deformed legs and failed hearts

The worst welfare problems arise from the industry's use of selective breeding (and rich diets) to get the birds to slaughter weight in double-quick time. Modern broilers are pushed to reach their slaughter weight in just 41 days, which is twice as fast as 30 years ago. What grows quickly is the muscle (which is what is eaten as meat), but the supporting structure of legs, heart and lungs fails to keep pace with the rapidly growing body.

The legs often buckle under the strain of supporting the overdeveloped body. As a result, each year millions of EU broilers suffer from painful, sometimes crippling leg deformities. In the worst cases they can barely walk and can only move by crawling on their shanks. Some die of starvation and dehydration as they simply cannot reach the food and water points. Professor Donald Broom has said that rearing animals so that their bodies are growing too fast for their legs "is rather like a child who is nine years old in weight having to stand on the legs of, say, a five-year-old".

The heart, too, often cannot keep pace with the overgrown body. Each year millions of EU broilers succumb to heart failure before even reaching their slaughter age of 6 weeks. The main heart problems are ascites and "sudden-death-syndrome".

It's a scandal that we have bred birds which cannot even get to the age of 6 weeks without millions suffering from crippling lameness and many dying of heart failure. These and other problems lead to 100,000 chickens dying in UK broiler sheds every single day; in the Republic of Ireland the figure is about 7,000 per day.

Overcrowding

In many broiler sheds an unbelievable 19 chickens – or more – are crammed into each square metre of floor space.

Scientific research shows that this severe crowding leads to serious welfare problems. Birds kept at high densities suffer from a higher incidence of pathologies (e.g. leg disorders, breast blisters, contact dermatitis) and higher death rates than birds stocked at lower rates.

Unprotected by the law

While pigs, calves and egg-laying hens are all covered by UK, Irish and EU laws, shockingly there are no detailed UK, Irish or EU laws protecting broilers on-farm, despite the severity of the health and welfare problems faced by these birds. **We believe the EU must now urgently enact laws to halt the suffering of broilers.**



© Vicky Altrideff



© Colin Seaton

The more overcrowded birds are also less active – simply because there isn't enough room to move – and their rest is often disturbed as other birds are constantly tripping over them and bumping into them.

The science shows that overcrowding exacerbates the problem of leg disorders. Birds who, due to lack of space, do not move around much, suffer from weaker bones. Equally, chickens kept at lower densities get more exercise, which makes their legs stronger.

Antibiotics

Conditions are so bad that in many countries the birds are often dosed with antibiotics in their water or feed to ward off the diseases which otherwise would spread like wildfire in the overcrowded sheds. This misuse of antibiotics in factory farming has led to the emergence of bacteria which are resistant to some of the antibiotics used to treat serious human diseases.

Skin diseases

Due to lameness and overcrowding, many broilers spend a disproportionate amount of time squatting on the litter (usually woodshavings) which covers the floor. All too often it is damp and dirty. Prolonged contact with such litter leads to many broilers suffering from painful breast blisters, hock burns and ulcerated feet. As well as being painful, these injuries allow infections to enter the bird; these can spread through the bloodstream causing joint inflammations.

Chronic hunger in broiler breeders

The health problems of broilers (problems induced by the extremely fast growth rates) are so severe that if – instead of being slaughtered at 6 weeks – they were allowed to live on, many would die before the age of puberty at 18 weeks.

This presents an enormous problem as regards one sector of the broiler industry – the broiler breeders, the birds whose role it is to produce the subsequent generations. The breeders must not only survive into adulthood, but must also remain sufficiently healthy to breed.

If the breeders were allowed to grow quickly, many would die before puberty and the survivors would suffer from reduced fertility. To avoid these problems, the industry has to find a way of slowing down the fast growth rates of the breeders (growth rates which have been imposed on the breeders to ensure that the birds reared for meat put on weight as quickly as possible). The industry's solution is often to feed breeders on severely restricted rations – in some cases just 25%–50% of what they would eat if given free access to food. One major scientific study concluded that restricted-fed broiler breeders are “chronically hungry, frustrated and stressed”.

The Science

A major report published in 2000 by the EU's Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare (SCAHAW) is highly critical of the intensive broiler industry. In particular it condemns:

- The rapid growth rates which lead to painful leg disorders and heart failure. The SCAHAW says leg disorders “are a major cause of poor welfare in broilers”.
- The severe overcrowding in broiler sheds.
- The chronic hunger inflicted on broiler breeders. The SCAHAW says these birds are “very hungry” and that “the severe feed restriction results in unacceptable welfare problems”.



© Animal Aid

Pain, fear and dislocated hips are common during catching.

Catching

When the time comes for the birds to be transported to the slaughterhouse, teams of catchers 'depopulate' the sheds at great speed often carrying 4 or 5 birds upside down in each hand. The chickens are held by just one leg, with rough, even brutal handling being commonplace. Catching in this way leads to dislocated hips in some broilers. This is associated with profuse haemorrhaging; in the worst cases, the femur (thigh-bone) can actually be forced into the bird's abdominal cavity.

Transport

Packed into crates on a truck which can carry up to 6,500 broilers, the journey to the slaughterhouse can be horrific. Each year in the UK alone, over a million chickens die en route to slaughter. And the dead-on-arrival figures are only the tip of the iceberg. Many of those that survive suffer terribly from extremes of temperature (bitter cold in winter, suffocating heat in summer), broken bones and bruises. During the journey the birds experience sudden jolting movements, vibration, loud noises, deprivation of water and food and overcrowding. All these lead to distress and extreme fearfulness.



© Kent & Sussex Courier

Millions of EU broilers die each year on the journey to slaughter – some from horrific accidents.

Slaughter

The birds are hung upside down from shackles. Having their legs squashed into the metal shackles is painful. The shackles are on a moving line which takes the terrified birds to an electrified waterbath, through which their heads are dragged. This is designed to stun them into unconsciousness. From there the line takes them to the automatic neck-cutting blade.

Many birds are not properly stunned and recover consciousness before or after neck-cutting. Some miss the stunner altogether and go fully conscious to the knife. The science shows that to ensure a quick death *both* the carotid arteries (the main blood supply to the brain) must be severed. Many abattoirs fail to do this which means the birds take longer to bleed to death and are more likely to regain consciousness during this process. Some birds are still alive when they are plunged into the scalding tank (designed to loosen feathers prior to plucking).

Modern slaughterhouses kill 8-10,000 broilers an hour – that's around 170 a minute. At these speeds it is difficult, even impossible, to properly safeguard welfare – or meat hygiene.



© GAIA

A terrifying end to a short, miserable life (above) and (right) a slaughterman intervenes when the automatic blade fails to cut a bird's neck properly.



© GAIA

The Life Cycle of the Broiler

a tale of suffering from hatchery to slaughter

In an age of fast food, we now have fast farming. The life of a meat chicken is a fast and furious 41 days of suffering.



© Colin Seaborn

Breeders

The breeding flock cannot be allowed to grow as quickly as the meat broilers as, if they did, many would not survive into adulthood to produce chicks. To slow down their growth, the breeders are often fed severely restricted diets which leave them "very hungry".



The hatchery

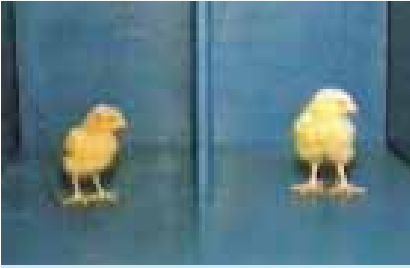
As soon as they emerge from their eggs, the newborn chicks are whisked along a series of conveyor belts as they are bounced, tumbled, sorted and crated for the journey to the farm.



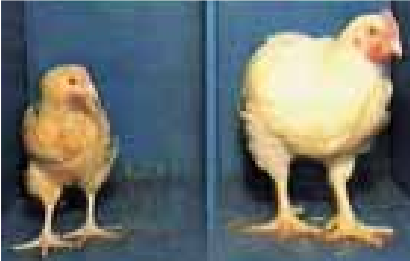
The Farm

Crammed into overcrowded sheds, they are pushed to reach their slaughter weight so quickly that their legs, heart and lungs cannot keep pace with the rapid body growth. Each year millions of EU broilers suffer from painful leg disorders and millions die of heart failure.

© Colin Seaborn



Egg layer at 9 days Meat chick at 9 days



Egg layer at 42 days Meat chick at 42 days

Growth comparison

The rapid and unnatural growth rates imposed on meat chickens can be seen by comparing their size at 42 days of age with that of an egg-laying chicken which grows at a normal rate.



The result

Many meat chickens suffer from crippling leg deformities.

© Association for the Study of Animal Behaviour



Catching

When the time for slaughter arrives, 'catchers' grab the birds by one leg and carry them – often holding 4 or 5 upside down in each hand – to the waiting truck. Many suffer dislocated hips during this brutal process.



Transport

Millions of chickens die each year in the EU on the journey to the slaughterhouse.



Slaughter

The birds are killed in conveyor belt abattoirs at the rate of 8-10,000 per hour. Some are not properly stunned. Often the correct blood vessels are not severed. As a result, many are in danger of regaining consciousness as they bleed to death.

© Animal Aid

© GAIA



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A humane alternative. Chickens can be kept free-range, enjoying fresh air and daylight. Moreover, slower growing birds can be used who are strong, healthy, curious and active and can run and fly.



© D. Whiting & CIWF

Main reforms needed

At present broilers on European farms are mainly unprotected by the law. Compassion in World Farming wants an EU Directive to be enacted to end the factory farming of broilers. In particular, the law should:

- require the chickens to be given sufficient space to prevent overcrowding
- prohibit the use of fast-growing breeds as these chickens suffer from a high level of painful leg disorders and heart failure
- require the breeding flock to be given sufficient food to prevent hunger
- encourage a major shift from indoor to free-range farming of chickens
- end the cruel practices which are commonplace during catching, transport and slaughter.

Consumer power – what you can do

Please be aware when buying chicken – either at the supermarket, the butchers or at fast food outlets – that the bird will probably have gone through great misery during its life. Yes, it's cheap – but its knock-down price has been bought at the cost of great suffering to the chicken.

You can help make a difference:

- Don't buy factory-farmed chicken – only buy free-range.
- Please urge your supermarket to stock free-range chicken if they do not already do so.

Also please write to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, urging her/him to join with our EU partners to adopt laws to end the factory farming of broilers. The address is: Secretary of State, Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, Nobel House, 17 Smith Square, London SW1P 3JR.

In the Republic of Ireland, write to the Minister for Agriculture, Agriculture House, Kildare Street, Dublin 2.



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