BACKGROUND

Worldwide, a total of around 50 billion chickens are slaughtered annually for meat, including nine billion in the USA, over five billion in the EU27 and around 800 million in the UK. (The UK produces around 1.2 million tones of chicken meat annually). Commercial meat chickens are often called ‘broiler chickens’ or ‘broilers’. Over 70% of meat chickens globally are raised in industrial farming systems, including the large majority in the UK, Europe and the USA, and a rapidly increasing proportion in developing countries.

INTENSIVE REARING OF CHICKENS

Commercial broiler chickens are bred to be very fast growing and heavy. Typically they are placed in rearing sheds (‘broiler sheds’) at one day old and are allowed no access to the outdoors during their lives. They reach slaughter weight of typically a little over 2kg in under six weeks (whereas traditional meat chickens take around 12 weeks to reach slaughter weight).

Intensive broiler sheds are generally bare except for feeding and drinking points and litter (such as woodshavings) on the floor to absorb the chickens’ excreta. Typically the shed is not open to air and is fan-ventilated and artificially lit, so the birds have no access to daylight and fresh air. The European Union Directive (EU Directive 2007/43/EC) on broiler welfare, agreed in 2007, will require at least six hours of darkness, four of which must be continuous, to be provided daily during most of the chicken’s life. This Directive will come into force in the UK in June 2010; until that point, broilers are only required to have an unspecified ‘period of rest from artificial lighting’. The chickens are kept so crowded that as they grow the floor of the shed can hardly be seen.

WELFARE ISSUES

There are very serious welfare issues in the breeding and intensive rearing of meat chickens:

Temperature, air and litter quality

Chickens confined in sheds cannot change their environment to avoid heat, cold or dirty areas as they could in natural conditions. The litter is usually not cleaned out during the birds’ lifetime. The litter can become wet and the air normally becomes polluted with ammonia from the chickens’ waste. Ammonia gas can be damaging to the chickens’ eyes and respiratory systems. Prolonged contact with wet litter can cause painful sores on the chickens’ feet, hocks and breast. Hock burns and foot pad sores are common. Fast growing chickens can easily become heat-stressed and often pant, a sign of thermal discomfort. If ventilation is inadequate in hot weather, thousands of
Breed and fast growth

Scientific studies have shown that fast-growing chickens have higher rates of lameness and heart disease compared to slower-growing breeds. Mortality of meat chickens is seven times that of young laying hens of the same age (which grow much more slowly). Fast-growing meat chickens spend much of their time lying down, even when they are only a few weeks old. They have high levels of lameness, which has been shown to be painful and is related to excessive growth rates (various studies have found that 25–30% of chickens are moderately or severely lame). They can also develop heart failure, particularly conditions called ‘ascites’ and ‘sudden death syndrome’. Millions of broilers die in their sheds from heart failure every year.

Feed restriction of broiler breeders

The chickens used for breeding are required to reach maturity in good health and fertility. Because fast growth would damage their health, their food intake is usually severely restricted. As a result, these chickens suffer from stress, frustration and chronic hunger.

Overcrowding

The crowding of meat chickens in barren sheds means that they have little opportunity for the natural foraging and investigatory behaviour of chickens. They lack exercise which is essential for bone development. As a result they can suffer with painful leg and hip disorders. Due to crowding, they are disturbed or trodden on when they are resting, have increasingly little space to move as they grow larger and may find it more difficult to reach food and water if they are lame. Crowding is also likely to lead to more air pollution, increased risk of heat stress and wet litter. A typical stocking density in the UK and Europe is 38–40kg weight per square metre (equivalent to around 17–20 birds per square metre by six weeks of age, i.e. a space allowance of less than one A4 sheet of paper per chicken). EU Directive 2007/43/EC (which comes into force in the UK June 2010) states that stocking density shall ‘not exceed 33kg/m²'; however, a derogation can be granted, permitting high stocking densities (up to 42kg/m² if certain conditions are met, equivalent to 19-21 birds per m²). In the UK, the maximum permitted stocking density will be 39kg/m². Scientific experts have concluded that stocking density should not be higher than 30kg/m² (equivalent to 14–15 birds of slaughter weight per m²). In hot regions of the world (for example, Brazil or southern China) sheds may be open to air and the stocking density is often lower, to enable the birds to survive the heat.

Catching, transport and slaughter

Before transport to slaughter, broilers are usually deprived of food for several hours. Feed
MEAT CHICKENS

withdrawal has been shown to increase both Campylobacter and E. coli infection of the crop; both significant causes of food poisoning which poses a public health concern. The processes of catching, crating and transport to the slaughterhouse are stressful, potentially painful if the birds are already lame, and too often cause injury or death from injury, suffocation or heat stress. Millions of broilers arriving at EU slaughterhouses every year are already dead as a result of injuries and stress caused by catching and transport. The slaughter process is also a serious welfare problem. Shackling by the legs is known to be painful and distressing for the birds and, where electrical stunning is used, stunning in a water bath is too often ineffective (the struggling birds may raise their heads and miss the water) resulting in fully-conscious birds having their throats cut.

HIGHER WELFARE ALTERNATIVES

There are much better alternative methods of rearing meat chickens:

Higher welfare indoor systems

In these systems the chickens are kept indoors but they have more space and are often slower growing (some are slightly slower growing versions of standard intensive breeds). For example, RSPCA Freedom Food™ standards in the UK stipulate a maximum stocking density of 30kg/m² and growth rate must not exceed 45g liveweight gain per day. The shed environment is often enriched, for example with straw bales, perches and pecking objects such as string or whole brassicas, to encourage the birds to move around and provide opportunities for foraging and resting.

Free-range

In these systems the chickens are given access to an outdoor range during the daytime and they are often breeds that grow somewhat more slowly than intensive chickens. In the EU, the birds must be at least 56 days old at slaughter, the maximum stocking density inside the shed is 27.5kg/m² and in addition each chicken must have at least 1m² of space outdoors.

Organic and higher welfare free range

In these systems the chickens are usually of slower growing, more traditional, breeds and will live for around twice as long as intensively reared chickens (minimum 81 days for Label Rouge and EU organic standards). Label Rouge standards stipulate a maximum of 11 birds/m² inside the house and at least 2m² per bird outside. EU organic standards stipulate a maximum stocking density of 21 kg/m² inside the shed and at least 4m² per bird outside. Higher stocking densities (up to 30kg/m² inside plus 2.5m² per bird outside) are permitted if the chickens are kept in small mobile houses which allow
easy access to the outdoors. The outdoor range is often improved by the addition of trees and shrubs to provide cover and shelter.

RECOMMENDATIONS
You can help to improve chicken welfare in a number of ways:

✓ Join Compassion in World Farming’s campaigns or donate to our work at ciwf.org.

✓ Contact your local grocery shop, restaurants and retail chains to ask them to stock a higher proportion of chicken meat from chickens kept in alternative systems (extensive indoor, free-range and organic);

✓ Avoid buying chicken that has been intensively reared, as the birds are likely to have suffered during their lives;

✓ Only buy chicken that has a label that guarantees either extensive indoor, free-range or organic production – note that standard industry assurance schemes, such as Assured Chicken Production (Red TractorTM logo) in the UK, do not guarantee extensive or free-range production and allow high stocking densities and fast-growing breeds;

✓ When buying ready meals or processed chicken meat, check the ingredients list to make sure that only free-range or extensively reared chickens have been used;

UK BROILER STATISTICS OVERVIEW

- In 2009 the UK slaughtered around 800 million chickens, resulting in around 1.2 million tonnes of chicken meat.

- The average poultry meat consumption in the UK is just less than 30 kg per person per year, with a total consumption of around 1.6 million tonnes (2008).

- In 2008, the UK exported around 278,000 tonnes of fresh and frozen poultry meat and 45,000 tonnes of processed poultry meat.
• In 2008, the UK imported around 332,000 tonnes of fresh and frozen poultry meat and 242,000 tonnes of processed poultry meat.

• A 2008 survey of 176 UK broiler flocks found that 97.8% of the birds had some degree of gait abnormality, 27.6% showed significant lameness (that equates to around 150 million broilers).

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING


EU marketing rules for poultrymeat (Regulation EEC No 2891/93 Annex IV).

