

SHE LOVES PERCHING IN TREES



Does it matter if she can't?

Perching in trees is just one of the things this laying hen loves to do. Descending from a small, shy woodland bird from the Indian subcontinent, her natural behaviours also include scratching and pecking for food, building nests, and dust-bathing to maintain her feather condition.

In most farming systems today, trees are out of reach for the laying hen. In fact, in some systems, she is unable to express even the simplest of behaviours, such as stretching her wings.

Welcome to the life of a laying hen. How you respond to the information in this leaflet will make all the difference in the world to her.

INDOOR FARMING

Confined No fresh air No trees

BARREN CAGES: NO LIFE AT ALL

A hen in a barren cage is unable to move freely. She cannot even stretch her wings. She has no perch to escape from having her feathers pecked by other hens. With no nest, she tries to seek a safe haven to lay her egg, but finds none. Eventually, unsatisfied, she lays her egg on the bare wire floor where it rolls out of her reach.

The light is dimmed and gloomy to make her docile and her weakened bones are prone to breaking. Due to their poor living conditions, barren cages are now banned in the EU, although they are common elsewhere.



FURNISHED CAGES: A CAGE IS STILL A CAGE

Furnished cages give the laying hen a few extra centimetres of space, but she cannot move freely or escape from aggressive hens. The cage has a few furnishings which are of some, but limited, value to her. With no litter, she cannot dust-bathe, but driven by her powerful natural instincts she will continue, in vain, to try.

She is given inadequate nesting, perching and scratching opportunities and exists in cramped gloom. Indeed, she never leaves her cage until she is removed for slaughter, often suffering broken bones as her fragile body is handled.



BARN SYSTEMS: MORE NATURAL BEHAVIOURS

If housed in a barn, the laying hen can perform many of her natural behaviours, but she remains in crowded conditions, jostling for space amongst thousands of other hens, with no access to forage or the outdoors.

Litter is provided for her to dust-bathe and scratch in and she has tiers or platforms to perch upon to help her escape from being pecked by other hens. She also has a nest box to lay her eggs in relative security.



FIVE FREEDOMS

It is internationally recognised that the laying hen is entitled to her Five Freedoms:

1 FREEDOM FROM HUNGER AND THIRST

2 FREEDOM FROM DISCOMFORT

OUTDOOR FARMING

Open space Fresh air Forage Potential for trees

FREE-RANGE: A MORE NATURAL LIFE

In a free-range system, the laying hen can perform nearly all her natural behaviours. By night she perches and roosts indoors. She has bedding and a nesting box to lay her eggs in peace.

By day, she can shelter indoors or choose to range outdoors where she moves freely, flaps her wings, flies, runs and can feel the sun on her back. She scratches and forages for insects and other natural foods.

In the best farms she can rest in the shade, bathe in dust or perch in trees to feel safe.



ORGANIC: A LIFE WORTH LIVING

In an organic system, the laying hen enjoys the ability to fulfil nearly all of her strong instinctive behaviours, such as bathing in dust, in the sun or shade.

The flock sizes are smaller than other farm systems so she has more space, enabling her to socialise more naturally. She is provided with a good nest, which satisfies her powerful urge to seek safety to lay her eggs.

In the best organic farms, her beak will be fully intact, allowing her to forage, preen and peck without pain. And she can perch in trees.



3 FREEDOM FROM PAIN, INJURY AND DISEASE

4 FREEDOM TO EXPRESS HER NATURAL BEHAVIOURS

5 FREEDOM FROM FEAR AND DISTRESS

THE LIFE OF A LAYING HEN

FROM BIRTH...

After hatching the chick is placed on a conveyer belt. The male chicks, of no value in egg or meat production, are removed and killed. Each female chick is loaded into a machine that amputates the end portion of her beak, without anaesthetic, unless she is destined for a farm where she can keep her beak intact.

REARING

From the hatchery, she is transported to a rearing site and placed in a barn or cage until she is 16 weeks old.

LAYING

After rearing, she is transported to the system where she will live out her laying year. Which system she is placed in makes all the difference in the world to her.

... TO DEATH

Whichever system a hen lives in, her life will end the same way. Once egg production slows down, she is sent for slaughter.

In most cases, she is carried upside down by one leg, which can cause painful dislocation of her hips. In the best barn, free-range and organic farms, she will be carried more carefully, by both legs to limit the pain and damage to her hips.

Following transport to the slaughter house, the laying hen may be shackled upside down, stunned by an electrical shock and killed by a cut to her throat. She may suffer extreme trauma as the stunning is not always effective.

Slaughtering by gassing, which is more humane, is on the increase. Her carcass is butchered and the parts are sold into the cheap meat market and pet food trade.



Higher welfare standards discourage beak mutilations. The best organic systems allow the young birds to range outside - this has health benefits later in life.

KEY WELFARE ISSUES

As the world's leading organisation for farm animal welfare, Compassion in World Farming believes that all farming systems must be fit for the farm animals reared in them. We should not make animals fit into systems that cause them pain and suffering, and that deny even their most basic needs as sentient beings.

The following key welfare issues must be addressed through a good choice of hen breed, good living conditions and good care:

MUTILATIONS

The laying hen commonly has a portion of her beak amputated soon after hatching to reduce the risk of pecking and injury. This painful procedure, known as debeaking, entails cutting through her nerve-rich beak with a hot knife, without anaesthetic. A laser can also be used. She often suffers long-term pain in her beak, which is her means of feeding, foraging and exploring her world. Commonly practised in many systems and countries, mutilations are avoided in the best farms.



FEATHER PECKING

Pecking is a strong, natural instinct for a hen. If she is suffering from hunger, boredom or lack of enrichment, she can turn on other hens as an object of interest or food. This behaviour can spread through a flock, causing great harm.



FORCED MOULTING

To extend the hen's laying period and increase profits, an extra egg laying period is induced through forcing a rapid moult. This is done by starving her so that she loses one quarter of her body weight in two weeks. This unnecessary practice causes great suffering to the hen and is banned across the EU. It is still practised widely in many non-EU countries, such as the US.

DOES THE LIFE OF A HEN MATTER?

Whether a hen can perch in a tree, or even move fully and be free from pain, hunger and fear, is determined by the farm system she is placed into and the management of the farm. We have seen how much this matters to her. Does it matter to you?

MAKE IT MATTER

Five Freedoms

All systems should provide for a hen's Five Freedoms

Cages

She must not be caged; barren cages should be banned

Mutilations

Her beak must remain intact

Forced moulting

She must not be starved

Nesting

She must have a nest to lay her eggs in

Feather pecking

She must not suffer feather pecking

Carrying

She must be carried upright, with support under her body

Slaughter

She must be slaughtered humanely; gassing is preferable.

FARMING WHERE EVERY LIFE MATTERS

Some farmers have achieved conditions for laying hens which are far more natural and higher welfare by using traditional breeds for the dual purpose of both egg laying and meat production. One such breed, 'You Chicken', is being farmed outside Beijing and is providing free-range lives for laying hens with many welfare benefits to her, to her farmers and to her environment.

What is more, unlike the billions of male chicks being killed at birth in hatcheries across the world, every single male 'You Chicken' is raised free range, for meat. And because this is a slower growing breed than other meat chickens, the males do not suffer from the painful heart and leg problems that afflict many of the 57 billion chickens farmed for meat each year.

This briefing outlines the life of a laying hen in different farm systems, from the barren battery cage to the highest welfare organic farms. How you respond to the information here will make all the difference in the world to laying hens.

For more information about the work of Compassion in World Farming, please visit ciwf.org

COMPASSION
in world farming 
ciwf.org

River Court, Mill Lane, Godalming, Surrey, GU7 1EZ
Tel: +44 (0)1483 521 953 Fax: +44 (0)1483 861 639
Email: research@ciwf.org

Printed on recycled paper.

Photos © Martin Osborne/Compassion in World Farming, iStockphoto and Shutterstock.
Written by Victoria Sacks and Emily Lewis-Brown, 2013.