RSPCA
Farm Animal Welfare
Factsheets
Meat Chickens

Chicken is the most popular meat consumed by Australians. On average, Australians eat 47 kg of chicken each year,¹ and for over 650 million meat chickens slaughtered every year in Australia for human consumption. These birds have been selectively bred over many generations to grow and gain weight in a short period of time, and both male and female meat chickens are farmed.

Meat chickens are typically slaughtered between 4-6 weeks of age. Depending on the weight requirements of the market, meat chickens may be ready for slaughter as early as 30-35 days (whole birds) and up to 55-60 days (chicken pieces).²

What are the housing systems?

In Australia, meat chickens are not kept in cages, nor are they given hormones. Most are raised in large, environmentally-controlled sheds and some (around 18% of the flock in Australia) also have daytime access to the outdoors once they are fully feathered.³ RSPCA Approved

Up to 60 thousand birds may be housed in an individual shed. Sheds are set up with automated feed and drinker systems. The floor of the shed is covered with a layer of bedding, which is referred to as litter. Modern sheds generally have climate-control technology, while older sheds may be naturally ventilated.

Free-range chickens spend the first three weeks of their lives (until fully feathered) inside these sheds, and are locked inside at night to protect them from predators. Once these birds have their adult feathers they can be given outdoor access.

If free-range, having access to a good quality outdoor range is important to encourage birds to explore and forage outside. The range should have sufficient shade and shelter provision to allow birds to feel safe. Otherwise, they will choose to stay indoors.

RSPCA Approved: As part of the RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme Standards, meat chickens may be farmed in an indoor environment or with access to the outdoors, whether they are raised in a higher-welfare indoor environment or with access to the outdoors, there’s a focus on providing for the birds’ behavioural and physical needs.

Issues in chicken meat production

Breeders

Breeder birds in the meat chicken industry lay the eggs that will hatch into chickens grown for meat. Breeder birds gain weight rapidly, to the point of obesity, and therefore develop an increased prevalence of health problems, reproductive problems and a decrease in sexual activity. To address these issues, access to food is restricted for breeder birds. This creates animal welfare concerns as birds experience chronic hunger and stress, and may display abnormal repetitive behaviours, aggression and injurious pecking which can cause harm to their fellow birds.⁴ RSPCA Approved

Conventional housing

Meat chickens raised in conventional systems spend their life in barren, cramped and dimly-lit environments. Birds are discouraged from moving about and eat continuously, gaining weight rapidly which causes severe welfare problems, including weak legs, eye and respiratory issues, and in some cases, heart failure. Weak legs means increased contact with often damp litter, causing foot pad burns, hock burns and breast blisters.⁵ RSPCA Approved

Catching and transport

Once the chickens are ready for processing, they are placed into crates and transported to the processing plant. Chickens can be caught by hand or gathered up by a machine for placing into the transport crates. If caught by hand, people usually catch a few chickens at a time by the legs and put them into crates. The catching process may cause the birds pain since they are caught by the legs, and meat chickens frequently experience leg disorders and painful joint conditions. During transport, chickens are not provided with feed or water. Some birds may die from heat stress or from being crushed during transport.⁶

Slaughter

All meat chickens in Australia are stunned (rendered unconscious) before slaughtered, which is required by law. This occurs either by electrical waterbath stunning or controlled atmosphere (gas) stunning. Electrical waterbath stunning unfortunately does pose welfare concerns. Birds are shackled upside down on a conveyor belt which can cause pain and injury. Upon lowering birds into the electrical waterbath they can be subjected to painful pre-stun shocks. Birds may also be ineffectively stunned depending on the electrical frequency in the waterbath, and the electrical resistance of each individual bird.

Buying Chicken Meat?

All chicken meat in Australia is ‘cage’ and ‘hormone’ free, however this claim doesn’t necessarily mean the bird is farmed humanely. By choosing higher-welfare chicken and poultry, birds have been raised in an environment where they’re encouraged to be active (to overcome serious health and welfare concerns) and express natural behaviours.

To ensure good welfare for meat chickens, look for a credible higher-welfare program such as the RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme.

Eating Out

You can also look for the RSPCA Approved chicken logo on a menu, or ask if the café or restaurant sources RSPCA Approved or other higher-welfare chicken.

¹ RSPCA knowledge base
² RSPCA knowledge base
³ RSPCA knowledge base
⁴ RSPCA knowledge base
⁵ RSPCA knowledge base
⁶ RSPCA knowledge base
Pigs

Australians today eat as much pork as they do beef, with around 27kg consumed on average, per person each year.³ However, Australia imports nearly as much pork as it produces, with most bacon, ham and other cured pork products in Australia imported. In 2017, 408 kilotonnes was produced in Australia, and 327 kilotonnes of pork imported. Imported pork can come from pigs reared in different conditions to pigs in Australia, and most come from Denmark, Canada and the US. Pigs grown for meat are slaughtered at around 25 weeks in Australia. Sows and boars can live on average for around 3 years.

What are the housing systems?

Pigs raised in Australia to produce meat may be reared under different housing systems. The vast majority of pigs are born and raised in indoor systems; a smaller number are born outdoors and raised indoors; while some are born outdoors and remain outdoors for their entire life.

Boars are usually housed individually, whereas pregnant gilts (female pigs who haven’t reproduced before) and sows (female pigs who have reproduced before) are mostly housed in groups. The use of individual sow stalls for entire gestation has been largely voluntarily phased out by industry in Australia in favour of group housing of pregnant gilts/sows, however those who have phased out their use can still use the stalls for up to five days. Where sow stalls are still in place, regulations currently require that they not be used for more than six weeks in any period.³

Conventional/Indoor Production

Pregnant sows may be housed in sow stalls where they are unable to turn around, but can stand and lie down. When the sow is due to give birth she will be moved to a farrowing crate, otherwise known as a piglet protection pen. Farrowing crates also restrict the sow, and she is unable to turn around. Once her piglets have been born the sow and her young will stay in the farrowing crate until 3-4 weeks, when her piglets are weaned. Once weaned the piglets are moved to weaner accommodation. Weaners will be kept in groups with concrete floors or slats, with or without bedding; or in large outdoor shelters (also known as ecoshelters) with deep bedding made up of straw, rice hulls or similar materials.

Outdoor Bred/Free Range

These systems do not use sow stalls or farrowing crates. Pregnant sows are kept in groups outside with access to housing that has bedding. When the sows give birth they are provided with farrowing hutches. These hutches do not restrict the sow from moving around, and allow her and the piglets access to the outdoors. In an ‘outdoor bred’ system, once the piglets are weaned, they are moved indoors for growing. Otherwise, in a ‘free range’ system, they will be moved as a group to another paddock.

RSPCA Approved

RSPCA Standards allow for pigs to be kept indoors in an enriched environment, or farmed in an outdoor system. Whether pigs are raised in a higher-welfare indoor environment or with access to the outdoors, there’s a focus on providing for the pig’s behavioural and physical needs – for both breeding and growing animals.

Issues in pork production?

Sow Stalls

A sow stall (also known as a gestation stall) is a metal-barred crate that houses a single sow for all or part of her 16 week pregnancy. The floor of the stall is usually concrete, with a slat-covered trench for manure at the rear. A standard sow stall is just 2 metres long and 60 cm wide.⁴ Sow stalls severely restrict the movement of pregnant sows, meaning they are unable to exercise and so their muscles and bones deteriorate. Pigs are highly intelligent and social animals. When confined to sow stalls they have no opportunity to engage in exploratory and foraging behaviour, or to interact socially with other pigs. This results in suffering and distress, indicated by high levels of abnormal behaviours such as bar biting.⁵

Farrowing Crates

A farrowing crate is a metal-barred pen that is similar in size to a sow stall but slightly narrower. The crate has an area around it that piglets can move into to avoid being crushed by the sow. Farrowing crates pose similar problems to sows as sow stalls, but also restrict sows from nest building before they give birth.

Tail docking and Teeth Clipping

Due to the lack of freedom and barren environment in conventional/indoor production, pigs can become bored and frustrated by being unable to express natural behaviours. This leads to stress, injury and abnormal and aggressive behaviours such as tail biting. To reduce the incidence and damage caused by tail biting, piglets endure painful procedures without anaesthetic, such as having their tails docked and teeth clipped.

Buying Pork?

Sow-stall free is a positive first step towards better welfare; but in these systems, pigs can still be kept in barren pens without bedding, and sows can still be confined to farrowing crates for weeks at a time. By choosing higher-welfare pork, you can help ensure the pigs have been raised in an environment where they can express natural behaviours, including exploring, foraging and socialising; and where they’re also protected from painful procedures being conducted without anaesthetic or pain relief. For pork that’s been farmed with a focus on welfare, you can look for the RSPCA Approved logo when in the supermarket.

Eating Out

Look for the RSPCA Approved pig logo on a menu, or ask if the café or restaurant sources RSPCA Approved or free range pork.
Consumption of seafood is increasing in Australia, with Australians eating nearly 14kg of seafood each year.¹ As wild stocks of fish decline, the aquaculture industry is producing more seafood for human consumption. Both the capture of wild fish and fish farming pose animal welfare concerns.

Tasmania’s farmed Atlantic salmon industry produces over 10 million fish each year alone. With the gross value of Tasmanian aquaculture at $771 million.² agriculture.gov.au

Farmed Atlantic salmon live for 3 years until they are harvested, a comparably long period for an animal farmed for food.³ RSPCA Approved

Scientific research shows that like other animals, fish are capable of feeling. This means we have a responsibility to avoid farming practices that might cause them fear, pain, suffering or distress.⁴ RSPCA Approved

The environment that the fertilised eggs are kept in must allow the salmon to thrive, even before they are born. Clean oxygen rich water must be flowing, with substrate below for the hatchlings to nestle in. The temperature of the water determines how long the eggs incubate for before they hatch.

The young salmon are kept in freshwater tanks, and moved to larger tanks as they grow. At 12-18 months, the salmon will undergo a physiological change that allows them to adapt to seawater. Once this happens they are moved to sea pens, where they remain for a further 15 months until ready for harvesting.

RSPCA Approved: Salmon on RSPCA Approved farms have space to swim normally in oxygen-rich water, with a focus on keeping them free from injury and disease, and handling in a manner that avoids stress. The RSPCA’s standards cover the entire lifecycle of farmed Atlantic salmon – from egg all the way through to when fish are harvested.

Buying Salmon?
If buying salmon, look for the RSPCA Approved logo to identify products that have been raised according to the RSPCA Approved Farming Standards.

Eating Out?
You can look for higher-welfare salmon when you’re eating out as well. Ask your favourite café or restaurant what their suppliers do to ensure the welfare of farmed Atlantic salmon.

Handling
Farmed salmon are handled at multiple times during their lifecycle. This can lead to stress and potential injury to the fish.

Stocking Density
When kept at high stocking densities, fish are more likely to become injured, and more susceptible to infections and disease. The amount of space fish have to express their natural behaviours is also affected by high stocking densities.

Poor Water Quality
High stocking densities can also affect the water quality and how fish are able to respond to changes in temperature and available oxygen.

Slaughter
Farmed fish are still commonly killed by asphyxiation (suffocation by taking them out of water), exposure to carbon dioxide, exposure to very low temperatures or bleeding without stunning. These procedures take several minutes to induce insensibility and cannot be regarded as humane.
Dairy Cows & Calves

There are nearly 1.7 million dairy cows in Australia, and on average, each cow produces close to 5,500 litres of milk a year. In contrast to the intensive nature of dairy production overseas, where cows may be housed in sheds for their entire lives, most Australian dairy cattle spend at least part of the day on pasture. The estimated average herd size is 268 cows, although the average herd size is increasing.

In Australia just over 9,280 million litres of milk is produced annually, and 36% of milk is exported abroad. Australians each drink 103L of milk a year, and eat 13.6kg of cheese.

What are the housing systems?

Cows: All dairy cows will come inside daily for milking, however indoor housing is not common in Australia. In Australia most dairy cows will have access to pasture during the day. Some farmers may also have housing for calving or feeding, but this is dependent on the individual farm.

Calves: It is common in the dairy industry to house new-born calves individually in their first days or weeks of life. After this, calves are usually housed indoors as groups in pens, often with bedding such as wood shavings. Once weaned, calves are given pasture access.

Issues in dairy production?

Bobby Calves

In order to produce milk, a dairy cow needs to be pregnant or lactating. When born, the majority of male calves and some females are surplus to the farmer’s needs. These ‘bobby calves’ are separated from their mother shortly after birth, hand fed then transported to slaughter at just 5 days old – an age at which they are not equipped to withstand the rigors of transport. Under the law calves are allowed to be off feed for 30 hours and transported for up to 12 hours. Each year, around 450,000 of these bobby calves are sent to slaughter, as they are not currently perceived by some in industry as having enough value to rear for longer, for veal or beef.

Dehorning and Disbudding

In a bid to avoid injury to people or other animals, the dairy industry recommends removing the buds or - if that’s not done soon enough - the horns, from calves. The problem is, these procedures are often performed without the use of anaesthetic or pain relief, and can be painful and stressful to the animal.

Lameness

Lameness is a painful condition and affects an animal’s ability to walk. It also causes an animal to eat less and lie down more. Dairy cows may have to walk long distances, over rough tracks from the paddock to the milking shed then stand for extended periods on concrete floors. This makes lameness a painful problem for many dairy cows.

Mastitis

Around 5% of dairy cows in a herd may suffer from clinical mastitis, a severely painful and potentially fatal condition related to hygiene, milking procedures and nutrition.

Live Export of Dairy Heifers

Each year tens of thousands of dairy cattle are shipped overseas for breeding. Export standards allow pregnant animals to travel on these long and stressful journeys. Heifers may be sent to countries where poor animal handling, transport and slaughter are routine practice and where they are susceptible to diseases against which they have not been vaccinated. There are currently no real protections in place for animals exported for production and breeding from Australia.

Buying Dairy?

Ask your favourite brand or retailer what they do to ensure good welfare for dairy cows and calves.

Many Australians value dairy in their diets and while dairy-free alternatives are available for those who choose not to consume dairy products, the RSPCA knows that to improve welfare for dairy cows and bobby calves today, we need a workable solution.

One way to improve calf welfare is to increase the value of male calves by encouraging producers to rear them, rather than sending them to slaughter at 5 days old. The RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme has developed Dairy Veal Standards which focus on raising calves to better welfare standards.

With the RSPCA’s Standards we’re encouraging farmers to raise dairy calves in a way that gives them a life worth living, gives consumers the confidence to support a humanely farmed product, and ultimately helps reduce the number of bobby calves treated as by-products of dairy farming.

Eating Out?

Ask your favourite café or restaurant what their dairy suppliers do to ensure good welfare for dairy cows and calves.
Layer Hens

Layer hens are chickens that are used in farming to produce eggs. They are a different breed to chickens farmed for meat. They are all female and have been selectively bred over time to lay larger numbers of eggs. Commercial breeds can lay over 260 eggs per year, with some even laying 300 eggs in a year.¹

The average lifespan of a layer hen used in egg production is 72 weeks. After this period their egg production declines, and they will be slaughtered. Layer hens can produce eggs without needing to mate with a rooster.

Currently in Australia today there are 16 million layer hens, and over 10 million of these hens are kept in barren battery cages.

Around 1 million hens are kept in barn systems, and 4 million hens are kept in free-range systems.

What are the housing systems?

Cage: Hens are kept in barren wire cages, often with no more room per bird than an A4 piece of paper. These cages may be called ‘conventional cages’ or ‘battery cages’ – they are the same. They have very little space, and have no perches, and no nests.

Some birds in cages may be provided with perches, nests and scratching pads. These may be called ‘furnished cages’ or ‘enriched cages’, however they are not generally used in Australia.

Cage-free/Barn: Hens are kept in large sheds with space to move around. Hens have nest boxes to lay their eggs in. Sheds may also have enrichment such as litter on the floor for dust bathing, and perches.

Free-range: Hens are kept in cage-free systems with outdoor access. The size and quality of the outdoor range depends on the producer. Australian Consumer Law defines free-range eggs as coming from hens with ‘meaningful and regular access’ to the outdoors and may be stocked at a rate up to 10,000 hens per hectare.

RSPCA Approved: Hens are kept in cage-free barns, some may also have access to an outdoor range in accordance with the RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme Standards. Whether birds are raised in a higher-welfare indoor environment or with access to the outdoors, there’s a focus on providing for the hen’s behavioural and physical needs.

Issues in egg production?

Cages: Scientific evidence shows that hens suffer when confined in battery cages. The lack of space, lack of exercise, constant standing on a wire floor and no perches leads to severe bone and muscle weakness. This is in addition to constant frustration due to a lack of environmental stimulation and enrichment, and their inability to express natural behaviours like stretching their wings, scratching, dust bathing and lay their eggs in a nest.²

Beak Trimming: Beak trimming is the partial removal of the tip of the beak, and results in a beak that is blunt or rounded at the end. It is one of the most common methods utilised by the poultry industry to control the impacts of severe feather pecking. Severe feather pecking is a welfare problem where birds vigorously peck at and pull out the feathers of other birds, often as a result of overcrowding, boredom and/or frustration.³

Male Chick Culling: Day old chicks are sexed at the hatchery following hatching. Male chicks don’t lay eggs and are not suitable for meat production they are killed. To minimise stress and pain, current best practice would ensure they be killed by carbon dioxide stunning or quick maceration.⁴

Osteoporosis: Commercial layer hens have been genetically selected to lay a very high number of eggs, and are therefore highly susceptible to poor bone strength and chronic disease such as osteoporosis. Poor bone health and bone fractures cause pain. Additionally, fractures cause stress, and negatively affect activity levels, egg production, and egg quality. Of all housing systems, hens kept in battery cages have the poorest bone and muscle health, and the highest number of fractures at the end of their lives.⁵

Handling: When layer hens come to the end of their commercial lay period they will be removed from the laying facility and sent to slaughter, or killed on farm using gas. This is known as depopulation. Ensuring low-stress handling by competent stockpersons during this stage is critical to keep stress and fear levels low.

Humane Slaughter: After depopulation, layer hens may be killed on farm using gas or sent to slaughter at an abattoir. Often the abattoir they are sent to will use electrical waterbath stunning. Electrical waterbath stunning unfortunately does pose welfare concerns. Birds are shackled upside down on a conveyor belt which can cause pain and injury. Upon lowering birds into the electrical waterbath they can be subjected to painful pre-stun shocks. Birds may also be ineffectively stunned depending on the electrical frequency in the waterbath, and the electrical resistance of each individual bird.

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Buying Eggs?

As a first step, look for cage-free eggs – whether in the supermarket, on product ingredient lists, and on the menu when eating out at cafes or restaurants.

Hens in battery cages live a miserable life. By choosing cage free, you’re choosing eggs that have been laid by birds able to stretch, flap their wings and lay their eggs in a nest.

Even better, look for eggs with the RSPCA Approved logo. That way, you know the hens have been kept to the RSPCA’s Standards for layer hens, and assessed under the RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme.

Eating Out?

Use the Choose Wisely directory to find cafes and restaurants near you serving cage-free eggs and suggest a local venue.

If in doubt, be sure to ask if the eggs are cage free.

CHOOSE WISELY.
PUTTING HUMANE FOOD ON THE MENU