

The Truth about Cage-Free, Free-Range, & Organic Eggs

Don't Buy the Lie

While hens used for cage-free, free-range, and organic eggs live slightly better lives than hens on battery-cage egg farms, the treatment and conditions are in no way humane or cruelty-free. In most cases the hens are still confined indoors, usually packed into filthy sheds or wire-floored enclosures with thousands of other birds. No federal law regulates cage-free or free-range egg production, so producers can label eggs as “humane,” “cage-free,” or “free-range” even if the hens are crowded together by the thousands in deplorable conditions. In other words, the terms are more of a marketing ploy than an indication of how well the animals are being treated. Hens used for USDA Organic eggs are required to have some outdoor access, but regulations do not define the amount or how fresh the outdoor area must be kept. Most organic egg farms simply have a small opening in the side of a large shed where some hens can get out to a small, manure-filled plot of land. California and Michigan have passed laws requiring that hens have enough room to turn around and spread their wings, but these laws do not implicitly ban cages, so egg farms can simply use larger cages to comply with laws in these states.

Birds naturally lay only one or two clutches of eggs per year, but domesticated hens have been bred to lay eggs constantly. Instead of a dozen or so eggs per year, a hen's body will have to produce and pass around 280 eggs annually. All the extra laying depletes her calcium and causes her other discomforts. This is true for ALL eggs from domesticated chickens, no matter how good of a life the hen has. We need to stop breeding domesticated farmed animals altogether.

While cage-free, free-range, and organic egg farms have less confining conditions than battery cage operations, they still engage in the following inhumane activities that are standard in the egg industry:

- To reduce loss from stress-induced fighting, chicks have their sensitive beaks, which are full of nerve endings, sliced off with a hot blade. This painful procedure deforms hens' beaks, causing some to die of starvation or dehydration because they have difficulty eating and drinking.
- Hens are kept in artificial conditions, where they cannot scratch or dust bathe in clean pasture, feel the warmth of the sun, or breathe fresh air. Many cage-free operations confine hens in wire-floored enclosures that cut into their feet.
- Hens are force molted—an egg industry practice of removing their food and water for up to two weeks to force their bodies into another egg-laying cycle.
- When no longer “useful” for egg production, hens are violently packed into cages, loaded onto transport trucks, and shipped off to be slaughtered.
- At slaughter, hens are brutally slammed upside down into shackles and moved by conveyor through whirling blades that cut their necks. The hens who miss the blades are scalded alive in the feather removal tanks.
- The hatcheries that supply replacement hens kill the male chicks at a day old by grinding them up alive, suffocating them in trash bags, or simply tossing them alive into the dumpster because the males are unable to lay eggs and are not the right strain to be raised profitably for meat. Several hundred million male chicks are killed by hatcheries every year in the U.S. alone.
- Live baby hens are mailed from hatcheries to egg farms and feed stores via the US Postal Service. Every year millions of chicks die en route from rough handling, dehydration, and starvation.

As you can clearly see, the only way to know you are not supporting multiple forms of cruelty, the eventual slaughter of hens, and the immediate slaughter of baby male chicks is to not consume eggs or foods containing eggs.

What about backyard hens or small family farms?

For every female chick bought from a farm supply or hatchery, a male chick is ground up alive, suffocated to death, or is tossed into a dumpster while still alive. Hatcheries are not 100% accurate when sexing newborn chicks, so there is a good chance you will end up with a rooster, which may bother neighbors and not be legal to have in many cities. If that happens you will have to find a new home for him outside the city—somewhere he can live out his ten-year life.

While having backyard chickens sounds appealing, and is certainly less cruel, many people find that taking care of chickens is more work than they anticipated. Hens [and mis-sexed roosters] have a ten-year lifespan and, like cats and dogs, require regular attention and veterinary care. Chickens also need enough space to roam, scratch, and forage, which many city backyards cannot provide. No for-profit farm can afford to care for hens for ten years and take each one to the vet for check-ups or when they need medical care, especially after hens stop producing eggs regularly. While individuals with backyard hens may be able to provide for all the needs and medical care required, it is unlikely to happen, even with the best intentions. This is evidenced by the flood of hens and roosters into animal shelters in recent years. When you calculate in the time and money involved in properly caring for companion chickens, it really does not make economic sense to keep them for egg production. Egg substitutes are not only healthier, but much more cost-effective.

Another concern is that consuming eggs from backyard hens or family farms tends to lead to consumption of commercially produced eggs, often as ingredients in non-vegan foods. In other words, it is a slippery slope. Also, when any animal is viewed as a tool to service a human need, that animal, and indeed all non-human animals, lose their rights as individuals with intrinsic value. The mindset that non-human animals exist to serve humans is what has led to the wholesale exploitation that we see in modern day factory farming.

Show Your True Compassion

By becoming vegan, you will save the lives of over 100 animals every year and show your commitment to living without exploiting other sentient beings. Vegan foods are not the product of systems that objectify, torture, confine, and kill animals—and by choosing vegan foods you are making a powerful statement of compassion that will spread to people around you. Your veganism will have a ripple effect and you will become a positive example and beacon to your friends, family, and colleagues. Many people become vegan because they know someone else who is vegan, so by being vegan you not only remove your support for the exploitation and killing of animals, you inspire others to do the same.

Replacing Eggs

Instead of scrambled eggs, try tofu scramble. Search online for recipes or buy Fantastic Foods Tofu Scrambler box mix. In baking, try Ener-G Egg Replacer, an easy-to-use box mix. One box replaces 113 eggs and costs around \$7. Bob's Red Mill also makes a powdered egg replacer. Both are available at many grocery stores or online. Also try one of the following in place of one egg for binding and moisture: 1 T water plus 2 T arrowroot flour, 1 T water plus 2 T corn starch, 1 T water plus 2 T potato starch, ¼ cup applesauce, 1 T ground flax blended with 3 T warm water, or ½ banana. For leavening, add 2 tsp baking powder plus 2 tsp water. For more alternatives to eggs, search “egg substitutes” on the internet.

For more information on why and how to become vegan, including recipes and nutrition facts, please request a free vegan starter pack from **Action for Animals** at afa-online.org. To view free-range and hatchery investigations visit [youtube.com/actionforanimals](https://www.youtube.com/actionforanimals). Find us online at [facebook.com/actionforanimals](https://www.facebook.com/actionforanimals), twitter.com/action4animals, [instagram.com/actionforanimals](https://www.instagram.com/actionforanimals), and action4animals.tumblr.com. Please also visit HumaneMyth.org for more information.