

The Suffering of Farmed Poultry - *Broiler Chickens*

The poultry industry is divided into two main sectors: egg and meat production. Laying hens are a strain bred specifically for high volume egg production. 'Broiler' chickens have been manipulated, through selective breeding techniques, to make them grow at around twice their natural rate. They grow so big and so fast that their legs are unable to support their weight and many collapse. Broilers are slaughtered at just six weeks of age – when they are still immature.

Around 840 million¹ chickens are slaughtered annually in the UK for an industry worth about £2bn per year. Approximately 95 per cent of these birds are intensively farmed inside huge sheds. The remaining 5 per cent are 'free-range' or organic and are slaughtered at 56 days and 80 days respectively.

Intensively farmed broiler birds

Chicks are artificially hatched and then housed in huge, windowless sheds for the duration of their six-week growing period. Often, a modern broiler house holds around 45,000 birds, who are usually kept on a litter bed of wood shavings or chopped straw. As the birds grow, space for individuals decreases. By the end of the growing cycle, each bird has only 0.5 square ft of floor and must push his or her way through a solid mass of other chickens to reach food and water points. Because serious leg problems are endemic, many die in the attempt.

Disease and Death

The life span of an unconfined chicken can be up to 10 years, yet broilers are usually slaughtered at 42 days. This is before they reach sexual maturity. They reach adult size so quickly because of a combination of genetic selection and the use of a high protein diet. Antibiotics with growth-promoting properties are also used, although they are formally administered for medicinal reasons.



Crippled during infancy

The combination of accelerated growth rates and unhealthy living conditions accounts for the huge number of birds who die prematurely. They are vulnerable to heart attacks, septicaemia and fatty livers and kidneys. They also suffer a high incidence of deformities, caused by arthritis, together with the stress of carrying so much weight on young bones. Nearly one-third have difficulty in walking or cannot walk at all, despite the fact that many of the weaker birds are 'culled' inside the sheds.²

Many broiler chickens also die from ascites: their growth rate is so rapid that their heart, lungs and circulatory system struggle to maintain sufficient oxygen levels. This results in breathlessness and distended abdomens caused by a build-up of yellow or bloodstained fluid. Respiratory or heart failure kills one in 20 birds.³

Visible indicators of suffering

Broiler houses are not cleaned during the growing cycle, which results in the accumulation of faeces in the litter – which, in turn, causes blistering, ulcerated feet and hock burns. The hock burns are caused by exposure of the skin to high levels of ammonia. It is not uncommon to find visible hock burns on chicken carcasses sold in supermarkets.

Broiler breeders

Breeding birds are the same strain as their progeny. This means that they are 'selected' to grow big and fast – and consequently suffer a host of ailments, leading to a very premature death. To keep them alive long enough to reach puberty and then go on to breed, the industry slows down their growth by depriving them of food. In fact, they are kept on between 25 – 50 per cent of what they would eat normally and, according to one major scientific study, are 'chronically hungry, frustrated and stressed'.⁴

'Free-range' and Organic birds

The term free-range suggests a handful of chickens scratching around a yard. But modern units usually contain thousands of selectively bred birds packed together in sheds. Pop holes allow the inhabitants to exit and re-enter when the weather is suitable. But because of the special stresses associated with a system that pretends to be what it isn't (the constantly shifting struggle amongst the birds for territory, and their movement from heated interior to the bug-laden outside world and back again), the genetically enfeebled birds typically suffer a premature mortality rate of 4 per cent.⁵ This compares with the 5 per cent for standard intensive systems.⁶



The label 'organic' also implies higher welfare standards but it comes with no guarantee that the animals were free-range. While organic and free-range animals are likely to have had a better quality of life than more intensively reared birds, they will be subjected to the same trauma of transport to the killing factory and the same terrifying, bloody death.

Loading and transportation of poultry

All poultry endure the same fate at the end of their productive lives, when they will be subjected to the ordeal of catching, transportation and slaughter. The birds are typically grabbed by the feet and thrust into crates, or modules, before being loaded onto lorries. Many suffer additional injuries at this time and hundreds of chickens can die from a panic-induced crush each time the catching gang enters the shed.

Others may die during the journey to the killing plants, often from heart attacks. Injuries and wounds account for other fatalities. The most common injury is dislocation of the femur (the bone between the hip and the knee). This is almost certainly the result of rough handling by catching teams.



Slaughter

Poultry slaughter methods are highly mechanised and designed to maximise speed rather than to minimise suffering. Chickens are removed from their crates or modules and suspended upside down by their legs on metal shackles. The most common method is for a conveyor to take the birds' heads through an electrically charged water bath, with the current designed to stun and leave them insensible to pain when their throats are cut.

They are killed by severing the main blood vessels in the neck. This is usually done with an automatic knife, with a slaughterman employed as a back-up to slit the throat manually of any birds missed by the machine. Once dead, the birds are immersed in a scalding tank to loosen their feathers before plucking.



Chicken catcher loads birds for slaughter

Killed whilst fully conscious

There is considerable evidence that the slaughter process is inefficient. Inadequate stunning results in some birds going to the knife and even to the scalding tank alive and possibly fully conscious.

References

- 1) Defra, 2010, Agriculture in the UK
- 2) Knowles TG, Kestin SC, Haslam SM, Brown SN, Green LE, et al (2008) Leg Disorders in Broiler Chickens: Prevalence, Risk Factors and Prevention, University of Bristol.
- 3) *The Independent*, 4 January 2008, 'The true cost of cheap chicken', Martin Hickman
- 4) C.J.Savory, K.Maros and S.M.Rutter, *Animal Welfare*, 2:131-132, 1993.
- 5) *The Times*, 29 February 2008, '1,726,400,000 free-range birds?' Martin Samuel
- 6) RSPCA, 'Behind closed doors', 2001.