



SPCA Certified farms are cage-free.



Hens can explore, dust-bathe, perch and use nest boxes.



The life of the egg-laying chicken

Everyone knows eggs come from chickens. But what do you know about the hens who lay the eggs?

It turns out, like our cats and dogs, hens have a wide range of emotional and social needs.

The behaviour of hens

In a natural setting, chickens explore and forage for food by scratching the ground. They spend about 70 percent of their day walking, scratching with their feet, stepping back and pecking at the ground in search of food. As well as finding food, the exercise keeps them fit and healthy.

Hens like to live in groups – flocks of about 1,000 other chickens. Within this flock, smaller sub-groups of birds form. Each has its own “pecking order” or social grouping. Similar to a whole school of kids made up of smaller groups of friends.

At night, hens like to perch up high to sleep – safe from predators. Their feet are designed to grip branches even when sleeping.

Chickens spend a lot of time grooming. They stretch their wings, flap and preen their feathers to keep them in order and water-proofed. They extract oil from a gland at the back of their tail and smooth the oil through their feathers.



Hen dust-bathing.



Cage-free hen resting on a perch.

To clean their feathers, hens dust-bathe in sandy soil. They roll and flick sand into their feathers. Oily dirt sticks to the sand and vigorous shaking removes the dirt and old oil. Then they reapply the oil.

A big event in a hen’s day is laying an egg. Hens lay about 320 eggs in a year – close to an egg a day. Before she lays an egg, the hen will search for a quiet, safe nesting place away from the larger group. A hen begins the hunt for a nest spot about an hour before she is due to lay her egg.

How hens are normally kept

Unfortunately, for 95 percent of hens raised in Canada, hens don’t have the freedom to do any of the behaviours described above. They don’t live in flocks but in very small cages called battery cages. Hens are crowded together with four or five other hens not of their choosing. They live that way their entire lives – from one to three years.

Each hen has about the same space as the size of this magazine. They stand on a wire floor their entire lives. There is no soil to scratch. They cannot stretch or flap their wings, or even stand up straight without hitting the cage top.

Hens can’t dust-bathe, perch or find a quiet nest box to lay their eggs. They must lay their eggs on the wire cage floor. As a result hens suffer greatly from frustration every day.

Why are hens kept in cages?

You might wonder why hens are kept this way if they suffer such frustration. The battery cage system was introduced in the 1940s. Previously, birds were kept on barn floors but there were problems with diseases. Plus, it was hard to gather the eggs. The caged systems made it possible to provide automatic feeding, drinking and egg collection. Most importantly, manure fell through the wire onto moving belts. The manure could be continuously taken out of the barn, reducing the spread of disease.

Another advantage of the caged system was that you could also get a lot more birds (30,000 is common) in a barn. All of these factors lowered costs for the farmers and resulted in less expensive eggs for you. But the cost to the hens is poor welfare.



95% of hens are housed in battery cages.



Hens stand on wire their entire lives.



four to six birds per cage.

Alternative egg laying systems

To improve the welfare for the hens, a few farmers are switching back to cage-free barns. The best systems are

designed to ensure hens can perform the behaviours they want to do. This means hens can forage, dust-bathe, stretch their wings, perch and lay their eggs in nest boxes. Most importantly, hens have the space and freedom to move about and form the groups they want to be with.

Hens from SPCA Certified farms are inspected to make sure the birds are both healthy and happy. Eggs farmed in this way do cost a little more than caged eggs, but the hens have a much better quality of life.

EGGSTATIC ABOUT CHICKENS?



Have you ever imagined getting fresh eggs from your very own chickens? You're not the only one! Many people are now raising hens right in their backyard.

While keeping chickens can be a lot of fun, it's also a lot of work. Here are some questions to ask yourself before adding a flock to your family.

ARE YOU ALLOWED TO KEEP CHICKENS WHERE YOU LIVE?

Some communities have laws against keeping backyard chickens.

DO YOU HAVE THE SPACE?

Chickens need a safe place to roost at night, a quiet spot to lay their eggs and plenty of room to spend the day scratching around in the dirt for food. Crowded coops make hens stressed and frustrated.

CAN YOU KEEP YOUR CHICKENS SAFE?

Chickens have many predators – on the ground and in the air. They need an enclosure that protects them from animals like hawks, owls, coyotes, raccoons and mink.

DO YOU HAVE THE TIME?

Chickens mean daily chores! Apart from feeding and cleaning, you'll also need to keep a close eye on your hens to make sure they're happy and healthy.

WHAT ABOUT VET CARE?

Like our pets, chickens can get sick or injured. You'll need a vet who has experience with farm animals. Regular dog and cat vets probably won't see your hens.

ARE YOU READY FOR A LIFETIME COMMITMENT?

Chickens can live a long time – up to 10 years! Hens lay fewer eggs as they get older, but they still require good care.

For more things to think about, check out spca.bc.ca/news/backyard-chickens.



HAPPY HENS

FOR BACKYARD CHICKENS TO BE HAPPY AND HEALTHY, THEY NEED TO BE GIVEN THE FIVE FREEDOMS:

1. **Freedom from hunger and thirst** (clean water and a balanced diet)
2. **Freedom from pain, injury and disease** (proper vet care)
3. **Freedom from distress** (protection from predators)
4. **Freedom from discomfort** (a clean, dry and warm living space)
5. **Freedom to express behaviours that promote well-being** (able to preen, dustbathe, perch, explore, socialize, eat, drink and rest as they choose)



WE WANT THE SCOOP ON YOUR COOP!

Do you have chickens at home? We want to hear about them!

Take our quick survey, and we'll enter you in a draw to win a copy of *A Kid's Guide to Keeping Chickens* by Melissa Caughey.

spca.bc.ca/youth-survey

The survey closes August 31, 2019.
Better get crackin'!



How to play

You need one die and player pieces, such as coins. Start at the hatchery beside Fin and Kat. Take turns rolling the die and moving along the game board. Stop at the stop sign and roll to see which farm you go to. To win you must roll the exact number to reach the FINISH: where cage-free hens roost at night. If you don't land on FINISH, wait until next turn to roll again.

In battery cages there are 5-7 hens crowded into each cage!



What laying hens prefer!

- Fresh water and wholesome food
- Quiet, private nest boxes to lay their eggs
- Dust-bathing material
- Places to perch, sleep and rest
- Space to explore and forage
- Natural light
- Vet care if sick or injured

What's SPCA Certified?

Farms that meet the BC SPCA's high standards for animal care can become "SPCA Certified."

This means farmers take special care of their animals. They provide what the animals need to be happy and healthy, like the list above for egg-laying hens. Look for the red barn logo on eggs, cheese and meat packages.



Learn more at spcacertified.ca.

BOARD GAME ILLUSTRATION: SCOT RITCHIE