

# Facts & Figures About Canadian

# Hens & Eggs

## In General:

- In Canada, a total of 26 million hens produce more than 600 million dozen eggs per year - or about 7.2 billion eggs. Ontario accounts for 40% of Canada's total egg production.
- The average Canadian farm is family-owned and run and has 23,000 hens.
- The average laying hen can lay approximately 340 eggs in one year.
- Canadian egg farms provide a steady supply of safe, high-quality eggs at a fair price. This is accomplished through efficient management and production of eggs, research, product promotion and marketing activities.
- In Canada no chickens are ever given hormones, regardless of the type of farm they live on.
- Canadians eat about 20.0 dozen (or 242) eggs per year.



## You were asking about...Eggs

### Housing: Where do laying hens live?

There are many ways that hens are housed. Housing hens inside barns helps to protect the birds from disease and predators, as well as the variable weather of Canada. The type of barn a farmer has depends on many factors including bird health and well-being, farm employee work environments, economics and market demand.

**Enriched colony housing** is becoming more popular on Canadian egg farms. Enriched colony housing has hens living together in small social groups, giving birds more room to move around, stretch, spread their wings and express natural behaviours. These include perching, scratching and laying their eggs in a private nesting area. Housing birds in smaller social groups also helps to reduce aggressive behaviours from the more dominant hens.

In **free run** barns, hens have access to the whole barn floor but do not go outside. The hens are able to scratch, walk freely and lay their eggs in nesting boxes.

In **free range** barns, hens have access to the whole barn floor or roam outside when weather permits.

In **aviary** barns, hens have access to the whole barn floor as well as different levels of the barn where they can perch, feed, drink and lay their eggs.

In **conventional** barns, hens are kept in small groups. This system allows hens to have equal access to fresh food and water and prevents problems from more dominant, aggressive hens. This type of housing is being phased-out by Canadian eggs farmers.

Regardless of the housing type, farmers make sure their hens always receive the best care. Farmers constantly monitor the barn environment, and will check several times a day to make sure the equipment in their barns is working properly to control the temperature, humidity, light and ventilation at optimum levels for their birds. Many newer barns have computerized sensors that can send a message to the farmer's cell phone to alert them of any changes.

## Nutrition: What do laying hens eat?

Hens are naturally omnivores. Farmers work closely with nutritionists and feed specialists to provide all of the essential nutrients for growth and good health.

Hens eat different quantities and types of food depending on their age. Feed rations are adjusted several times according to the age of the flock and the number of eggs they are laying. When birds first arrive on the farm as 18 week old pullets (young hens that haven't started laying eggs), they're fed a diet rich in protein (as much as 18 percent protein). As the birds grow, the protein level in the diet is reduced. As they begin to lay eggs, dietary protein levels are again increased and then decreased over time. The diet contains plenty of grains as well as vitamins and minerals. In fact, the feed hens eat can be compared to the cereal we eat for breakfast.

They also have constant access to food and water through automatic feed and water lines in their barns.

No egg-producing hens are ever fed hormones. On the rare occasion that hens need to be treated for an illness or disease, antibiotics are prescribed under the guidance of a veterinarian and the eggs are disposed of.

Natural supplements can be added to the feed and may include extra calcium to help the birds develop stronger bones and thicker egg shells.

Egg yolk colour can range from pale yellow to deep orange. It does not affect the flavor, nutrient value or quality of the egg. Wheat-based feeds tend to produce a paler yolk colour, while corn-based feeds produce a darker yolk colour.

## About the life cycle of laying hens

Chickens that are raised for egg production will travel through four specialized stages: breeder farms, hatcheries, pullet farms and layer farms.

### Breeder farms

Certain breeds of chickens are selected for the characteristics that are favourable for egg production. Hens are kept with roosters to naturally fertilize the eggs. The fertilized eggs are collected, cleaned and carefully stored, before being sent to a hatchery.

### Hatcheries

Trays of fertilized eggs are placed in incubation cabinets called "settles" where, for the first 18 days, the eggs are turned frequently by the automatic tilting of the egg trays. This prevents the embryos from sticking to the inside of the shells. Three days before the chicks are due to hatch, the eggs are moved to hatching trays and placed in hatching cabinets where the temperature, humidity and ventilation are strictly controlled. The chicks hatch 21 days after being placed in the incubator.

Once hatched, the female chicks are vaccinated to protect them against common and serious poultry diseases. They may also have the sharp tips of their upper beaks trimmed at this time to prevent aggressive birds from hurting other birds. They are then sent to pullet farms.

### Pullet farms

At the pullet farm, the birds are given nutritionally balanced feed rations, supplemental heating, timed lighting and special care as they mature. It takes the pullets 18 to 20 weeks to mature into laying hens. Most layer farms will get pullets from designated pullet farms, but some raise their own pullets.

Most pullet farms use an "all-in, all-out" system. This means that all birds arrive together and move to the laying barn all together. This allows for the barn to be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected between each flock.

### Laying farms

At approximately 19 weeks of age, pullets are moved to laying barns. The birds are now called hens or layers and will begin laying eggs between 18 to 20 weeks of age. In a typical flock, egg laying increases until the age of 26 to 28 weeks when more than 90 percent of hens are laying one egg a day. Their rate of laying eggs will then decline over the next 40 weeks. Hens will then lay eggs for 52 to 60 weeks.

As with the pullet farms, once the birds have left, the barn will be completely cleaned and disinfected before a new flock moves in.

