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The Truth About Eggs – What Commercial Egg Farmers Don't Want You to Know

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By Dr. Mercola

A massive scale egg producer in Pennsylvania has made the news for inhumane treatment of chickens and unsanitary conditions.

Kreider Farms, which houses seven million hens, appears to be the next sickening example of what allegedly happens behind the scenes at CAFOs (confined animal feeding operations).

The Humane Society recently released an undercover video that exposes the horrific conditions endured by the birds in this operation.

This includes filthy living conditions, overcrowding with up to 11 birds per cage, dead birds apparently left untended, and a severe fly infestation capable of spreading salmonella across the chicken population.

The worker capturing the video reports mummified corpses were lying on the ground under other hens that were laying eggs.

Kreider Farm's owner, Dave Andrews, claims the allegations are false and that three state agencies have given the farm a clean bill of health. He did admit, however, that one of the farm's buildings tested positive for salmonella but has since been cleaned up.

This egg industry news comes on the heels of a number of egg recalls, including a massive one in 2010 in which the feds recalled 550 million eggs when officials found samples of salmonella matching a strain linked to an outbreak in the feed and barns of one Iowa egg producer.¹

It was further revealed that the Iowa egg producer *knew* about his salmonella problem months before the outbreak, which sickened nearly 2,000 people... but he continued to sell them, nonetheless.² Another salmonella outbreak associated with live poultry from a mail-order hatchery in Idaho sickened 37 people in 11 states.³

It's no mystery why these diseases take hold in henneries. Massive numbers of chickens in deplorable living conditions become stressed, then become sick and contaminated, spreading illness up the food chain. And the next step up the food chain is you.

Proof that Salmonella Contamination can be Related to Farm Conditions

The raising of egg-laying hens indoors and in cages in ever larger commercial operations has detrimental effects on animal welfare, the environment, and the

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Story at-a-glance

- » The Humane Society released an undercover video showing horrific conditions at a CAFO (confined animal feeding operation) in Pennsylvania housing seven million hens, including filth and overcrowding and apparently untended dead birds
- » The raising of massive numbers of egg-laying hens indoors and in cages in huge commercial operations has detrimental effects on the birds, the environment, the eggs, and ultimately on your health; research proves salmonella contamination is related to these adverse conditions
- » The Humane Society is endorsing and promoting new animal handling legislation specific to the egg industry. The Egg Products Inspection Act Amendments of 2012 (H.R. 3798), which proposes a new housing system that would double the space allotted for each hen, is supported by the United Egg Producers, and has a total of 53 sponsors
- » The solution lies in raising animals naturally and sustainably, as modeled by pioneering farmer Joel Salatin of Polyface Farms, expert and author of several books on the subject
- » You can be part of the solution by obtaining your eggs from a local farmer who raises them humanely and sustainably, understanding your egg carton labels, and possibly even raising your own chickens

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nutritional value of the eggs. The size of the hens' confinement space is directly related to salmonella risk: the smaller the space, the higher the risk of contamination. A 2010 British study⁴ found that eggs from hens confined to cages, as they often are in CAFOs, had 7.7 times greater odds of harboring salmonella bacteria than eggs from non-caged hens.

Another study found that while more than 23 percent of farms with caged hens tested positive for salmonella, this dropped to just over four percent for organic, i.e. free-range pastured flocks. The highest prevalence of salmonella occurred in the largest flocks (30,000 birds or more), which contained over four times the average level of salmonella found in smaller flocks.

Inhumane Treatment of Hens Challenged by Proposed Legislation

When I say "insufficient space," that's really an *understatement*. Many egg-laying hens are confined to cages with fewer square inches than *one sheet of notebook paper* – too small for them to even stand up straight or raise a wing – which prevents them from engaging in natural self-comforting behaviors, such as stretching, preening or bathing.

The birds are further stressed because they are prevented from building nests. Instead, their eggs drop through cage wires for collection, resulting in great frustration.

Constant laying leaches calcium from their bones, so they can get severe osteoporosis, leading to pain and broken bones (known as Cage Layer Fatigue⁵). They also experience injuries from standing in one place their entire lives, on wires that eventually cut into their feet. Stress-induced maladaptive behaviors, such as injurious pecking and cannibalization, soon follow. Complications arising from these abysmal conditions lead CAFO operators to resort to a number of inhumane practices. For example:

- A painful mutilation of baby chicks called debeaking (or "beak trimming") is performed in order to prevent injurious pecking and cannibalism
- Hens are starved for the purpose of forcing them to molt, which forces them to lay eggs longer than normal
- Male chicks are destroyed (usually inhumanely) because they're of no use to the egg industry

Sparked by the Kreider Farms video, the Humane Society is endorsing and promoting new animal handling legislation specific to the egg industry. The Egg Products Inspection Act Amendments of 2012 (H.R. 3798)⁶, proposed in January, is supported both by the Humane Society and the United Egg Producers, and has a total of 53 sponsors. The bill, which proposes a new housing system that would double the space each hen is allotted, has the meat industry in a tizzy, as it represents stricter oversight of how livestock and poultry producers raise and care for their animals.

Eggs from Pasture-Raised Hens Proven Superior

Without question, this legislation is very important and long overdue. But there is something you can do *right now* to improve your own health and the lives of these animals, without having to wait for the legislative process to unfold. You can buy your eggs from farmers who raise happy, healthy chickens the natural way... which allows chickens to express their "chickenness" – as Joel Salatin, a pioneer in sustainable agriculture, would say! In addition to being better for the environment, eggs from pastured hens are also nutritionally superior, as demonstrated in *Mother Earth News'* 2007 egg testing project. Compared to official U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) nutrient data for commercial eggs, eggs from hens raised on pasture and allowed to freely forage outdoors may contain:

- Two-thirds more vitamin A
- Twice as many omega-3 fats
- Three times as much vitamin E
- Seven times more beta carotene

Eggs contain some of the highest quality protein you can eat, as well as beneficial fats, vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants.

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Two raw egg yolks contain nearly twice as many antioxidants as an apple, but be aware that cooking them will reduce that by half. Cooking your eggs can also increase your likelihood of developing an egg allergy. Heating the egg protein actually changes its chemical shape, and this distortion can easily lead to allergies.

If you consume your eggs in their raw state, the incidence of egg allergy virtually disappears. I also believe eating eggs raw helps preserve many of the highly perishable nutrients such as lutein and zeaxanthin, which are powerful prevention nutrients for age-related macular degeneration, the most common cause of blindness.

Beware of consuming raw egg *whites* without the yolks as raw egg whites contain avidin, which can bind to biotin. If you cook the egg white, then the avidin is not an issue. Likewise, if you consume the whole egg raw (both yolk and egg white), there is more than enough biotin in the yolk to compensate for the avidin binding.

If you choose to cook your eggs, then soft-boiled would be your best option. Scrambling your eggs is one of the *worst* ways to eat eggs as it actually oxidizes the cholesterol in the egg yolk. If you have high cholesterol this may actually be a problem as the oxidized cholesterol may cause some damage in your body.

How to Raise Healthy, Happy Chickens

Joel Salatin of Polyface Farms is a pioneer in sustainable agriculture and has mastered the art of raising healthy, happy chickens that produce outstanding eggs. I recently visited [Joel Salatin](#) at his farm in Virginia. He practices the local, sustainable model of food production, which is in stark contrast to the more prevalent model of large-scale mass food production that's seen today. The "bigger is better" food system has reached a point where its fundamental weaknesses are becoming apparent, and foodborne disease and loss of nutrient content are just two of the most obvious consequences.

Total Video Length: 48:03

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The question is, what kind of food system do YOU want? If every American decided to not eat at a fast food restaurant tomorrow, the entire system would collapse overnight. It doesn't take an act of Congress to change the food system. All that's required is for each and every person to change his or her shopping habits.

Beware of Misleading Claims on Your Egg Carton Labels

You can't always tell everything about the quality of your eggs or the treatment of the hens that produced them by reading your egg carton label. In fact, egg labels have become quite confusing. Descriptors like "natural" and "cage-free" make eggs sound like they came from happy little chickens running about in a lush field, eating bugs and dandelions like Salatin's chickens at Polyface Farms.

But that's *rarely* the case, unless those eggs came from a small, local farm practicing sustainable farming.

If you can't visit your egg farm or meet with the farmer face to face, then you can at least choose your eggs based on some

factual information. The Humane Society^z has outlined some of the most common egg carton claims and certifications and what they actually indicate, which I've summarized in the following chart. Also check out the [Cornucopia Institute's Organic Egg Scorecard](#) that rates egg manufacturers based on 22 criteria, and see how our brand measures up.

LABEL	ANIMAL TREATMENT	ANIMAL DIET	CAN YOU TRUST IT?
Animal Welfare Approved	Cage-free and have continuous access to outdoors; can engage in natural nesting, perching; allowed to molt naturally; space requirements for nesting and perching; debeaking prohibited	Organic GE-free food <i>encouraged but not required</i> ; <u>antibiotics</u> allowed if bird temporarily removed from operations	Yes. Humane Society regards as highest animal welfare standard of any third-party program; annual audits
Certified Humane	Cage free environment <i>but not necessarily outdoors</i> ; adequate space must be allowed for natural scratching and perching	Free of animal byproducts, antibiotics, growth promoters, <u>arsenic</u> ; antibiotics only under supervision of vet	Yes. But standards a bit less stringent than Animal Welfare Approved
American Humane Certified	Cage confinement and cage-free systems allowed; so-called "furnished" cages are only the size of a legal sheet of paper; forced molting prohibited but <i>debeaking allowed</i>	No restrictions	Yes. However, the allowed cages are proven detrimental to these birds and are <i>opposed by nearly every animal welfare group</i>
Food Alliance Certified	Cage-free and free access to outdoors or natural daylight; must be able to nest and perch; space density specified; forced molting prohibited but <i>debeaking allowed</i>	No restrictions	Yes. Compliance verified through third-party audits
United Egg Producers Certified	<i>Permits routine cruel and inhumane factory farm practices</i> ; 67 square inches per bird; cannot nest or perch or even spread their wings; forced molting prohibited but debeaking allowed	No restrictions	Yes. Compliance verified through third-party audits
Certified Organic	Uncaged inside barn or warehouse, with outdoor access, but duration is poorly defined; <i>debeaking and forced molting allowed</i>	Organic diet free from antibiotics or <u>pesticides</u>	Yes. Compliance verified through third-party audits

<u>Omega-3 Enriched</u>	<i>May be caged</i>	Hens fed increased omega-3s from flaxseeds, fish oil or algae	Maybe. Type of omega-3 inferior to beneficial EPA/DHA you'd get from fish or krill oil; pastured eggs have far superior omega-3 fat profile
Pastured	Often housed on grassland in portable shelters for access to fresh grasses and bugs	BEST natural diet possible, biologically ideal	Maybe, if you know the farmer and his practices (no third-party inspection)
Cage-free	Uncaged inside barns or warehouses, but <i>no access to outdoors</i> ; can engage in walking, nesting, spreading their wings; <i>debeaking allowed</i>	No restrictions	No. Lacks third party auditing
Free-Ranging or Free-Roaming	Chickens allowed outside, but for no specified length of time; <i>debeaking and forced molting allowed</i>	No restrictions	No. Lacks independent third party certification, so anyone can use this label
Natural	<i>Means absolutely nothing</i> ; may be raised in inhumane conditions	Hens may be pumped full of antibiotics, fed <u>GE corn or soy</u> , or contaminated with arsenic	No!

Resources for Finding Pastured Organic Eggs Near You

One of the best ways to ensure you're getting the highest quality eggs is sourcing your eggs from a local farmer who practices sustainable agriculture and raises chickens humanely. Every state has a core sustainable agriculture organization or biological farming organization supporting the farmers in that state. There are also increasing numbers of "eat local" and "buy local" directories that list farms in your particular geographic area. The following organizations may help you locate farm-fresh foods close to home:

1. **Local Harvest:** This website will help you find farmers' markets, family farms, and other sources of sustainably grown food in your area
2. **Alternative Farming Systems Information Center:** Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)
3. **Farmers' Markets:** A national listing of farmers' markets.
4. **Eat Well Guide: Wholesome Food from Healthy Animals:** A free online directory of sustainably raised meat, poultry, dairy, and eggs from farms, stores, restaurants, inns, and hotels, and online outlets in the United States and Canada.
5. **Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA):** CISA is dedicated to sustaining agriculture and promoting small farms.
6. **FoodRoutes:** Helps you connect with local farmers to find the freshest, tastiest food possible. On their interactive "Find Good Food" map, you'll find listings for local farmers, CSA's, and markets near you.

If you're a farmer or interested in becoming one, I suggest reading some of the books Joel Salatin has authored, such as *The Sheer Ecstasy of Being a Lunatic Farmer*. You might also want to investigate a number of helpful organizations I have listed on my [Sustainable Agriculture](#) page.

The [PolyFace Farms](#) website also offers a wealth of information and resources for farmers and consumers alike, including an online store where you can obtain the actual physical hardware to make everything from fences to chicken feeders. Raising your own chickens and eggs isn't as difficult as you might think, and there are ample resources out there. It may take a little time and effort, but it's well worth it.

Joel's slogan is: "We're healing the land one bite at a time." My thought is, you can *heal your body* one bite at a time as well, if you provide it with the highest quality foods possible.

[\[+\] Sources and References](#)

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