

# Broiler Chickens Fact Sheet

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**Every year in Australia alone, an astonishing 488\* million chickens are raised and slaughtered for meat.**

Only around 4% of chickens are raised 'free range' in Australia (and about half of that is also 'organic').

*\*Australian Chicken Meat Federation estimate for 2006/7*

## History

Intensification of the broiler chicken industry started in the late 1950's, when the use of 'dual purpose' chickens for egg and meat production ceased and new poultry strains were produced specifically for meat production. For example, in 1950/51, only 3 million broilers were raised commercially, and now over 400 million are raised and killed in Australia each year. In addition to the breeding program to grow chickens faster (and so cheaper), demand was also growing, and for example Kentucky Fried Chicken opened its first Australian store in 1968, and increased chicken consumption radically. In the early 1970s in just 12 months as 75 Kentucky Fried Chicken stores opened, Australian production of chicken increased 38%.

The result of the narrowly focused breeding programs has been a bird which grows twice or three times as fast as a normal chicken and converts its food into meat in a much more efficient way. Most are raised under intensive systems and reach slaughter weight at 5-7 weeks of age. As a consequence the price of chicken meat has declined and consumption has risen several fold. To achieve the economies of scale to allow ever cheaper production the broiler industry is concentrated primarily with only a few very large companies in Australia, and is totally integrated - from growing and manufacturing the high protein feed needed for the chickens, breeding the chicks (about 6 million breeder 'parent' birds in Australia), contracting the 'growers' to raise them in large sheds, to mechanized slaughtering and processing plants. Three large integrated companies supply about 80% of Australia's broiler chickens - Inghams Enterprises, Bartter Enterprises and Baiada.

The modern phenomenon of "cheap chicken" comes at enormous costs to the welfare of the animals involved.



## Intensive selective breeding

Over 50 years ago it took 98 days for a chicken to grow to 1.6kg. By 1986, due to selective breeding, it only took 37 days. Baby birds, who still chirp and have soft feathers, have the bodies of adult birds. This unnatural growth rate puts enormous pressure on the heart and immature skeleton and is the cause of many health problems.

Extreme selection pressure for large breast muscles has further distorted the anatomy of these animals and puts great pressure on their developing legs. They often therefore crouch down with their large breast on the floor of the shed. This frequent contact with the floor of the shed may lead to painful ulceration of the skin known as breast blister.



Lameness caused by dislocation of joints and bone fractures are major and unavoidable consequence of selective breeding for increased growth rates. Many birds are unable to walk or even stand up well, resulting in "hockburn" as they waddle around in the damp ammonia-soaked litter. Skin problems are exacerbated by the progressive build up of moisture and droppings in the litter. Around 2% of birds die in the sheds from illness, trauma and

starvation when they are unable to reach food and water, or are trampled by other birds.

Selective breeding for rapid growth rates has also led to a syndrome associated with inability of the heart to adapt to the rapid increase in the body. Called Acute Death Syndrome (ADS) or Sudden Death Syndrome (SDS), the cause of death is heart failure and pulmonary oedema, with the animals essentially drowning due to fluid accumulation in the lungs.

## Housing

A typical facility may house 300,000 birds at a time with 40,000 - 60,000 birds per shed. Contracted 'growers' for the large companies therefore each grow several million birds annually.



The inside of a broiler chicken shed

The chickens live on the ground on litter (wood shavings, rice hulls etc) in huge sheds. Overcrowding is a major problem as stocking densities of 20 birds or 40kg per square metre are allowed as this is common towards the end of their short life in the shed.. This includes space for feeding and watering equipment, which means that for birds that are slaughtered at 2 kilograms, each has the equivalent of 500 square centimetres floor space (less than the size of an A4 page). As the chickens near their target weight the floor of the shed can barely be seen as it is carpeted with birds.

The sheds are dimmed to keep the birds as inactive as possible so that food conversion is maximised and pecking and fighting through frustration and over-crowding minimized.

The production system is "all-in/ all out" which means that for the whole of the 5 - 7 weeks that the birds are in the shed the droppings are allowed to accumulate on the floor. As the chickens grow the air may become polluted with ammonia, dust, bacteria and fungal spores which cause health problems for both people and chickens.

## Transportation

At approximately 5-7 weeks of age, chickens have reached the 'target' weight for slaughter.

Before catching the chickens to be transported for slaughter, food is withdrawn for 8-12 hours and water for 1 hour. Catchers walk through the sheds at night grabbing birds by one leg and carrying them in bunches (up to five each hand) to crates. They are then bundled into the crates and stacked onto a truck. Humane handling is impossible as catchers must handle 300-500 birds per hour. Many of the birds already have fractures and dislocations and this process adds significantly to their pain.

Once on the truck, the chickens, who have spent their entire lives in dim sheds are then exposed to traffic noise and at times also temperature extremes. Some will die during transportation due to rough handling or in summer due to heat stroke if the truck ventilation is poor. Other causes of death include heart failure, trauma and blood loss due to hemorrhage into dislocated hip joints resulting from the rough catching process.

As with all animals and birds factory-farmed in Australia, the first glimpse that they will have of the outside world is likely to be on their way to be slaughtered.

Each year in Australia almost 1 million chickens are estimated to die during transport to the slaughterhouse. Of those that survive, some 14 million may have fractures (3%) and over 20 million chickens (4.5%) may have dislocated hips when they arrive for slaughter (based on UK studies using similar birds and transport systems).

## Slaughter

When the trucks arrive at the slaughterhouse, chickens are pulled from the crates and shackled upside down by their feet into metal stirrups on an overhead conveyor.. The conveyor carries them into the killing room where their heads pass through an electrified water bath intended to stun them. As they pass along further, an automatic knife cuts their throat, and then they proceed into a scalding tank to loosen their feathers before plucking.

Unfortunately things do not always run smoothly. Some birds lift their heads and miss the electrified water bath and they are therefore still fully conscious when they reach the automatic knife. Some birds may also miss the knife and are then lowered into the 50 degree scalding tank while still alive.

Back-up people are supposed to cut the throats of the chickens that miss the automatic knife, but due to the emphasis on speed in the processing plants this may not always occur. There are no animal welfare inspectors onsite to ensure that the slaughter process is humane.

## Australian Model Code of Practice

The Australian Model Code of Practice for Domestic Poultry provides some general guidelines for the management of meat chickens and recognizes that "the basic requirement for the welfare of poultry is a husbandry system appropriate to their physiological and behavioural needs". The reality of life for 'broiler hens' could not be further from this "ideal" and there are no guidelines within this Code that in any way provide for all the physiological and behavioural needs of chickens.

Once again the primary purpose of this Code is to give industry operators exemptions from being prosecuted under state animal protection laws.



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