



LESSON 9: "IS IT OK TO EAT 'HAPPY' EGGS?"

Today's lesson is about eggs and why you may want to rethink eating them, even if they were labeled "happy" eggs. I often get asked whether it is OK to eat eggs from happy hens or to keep hens in your backyard for that purpose. Laying eggs is part of a hens natural cycle, so it doesn't hurt her per se. That being said, there are many factors to take into consideration before deciding whether or not to cut eggs out of one's diet entirely. Let's take a look at the egg industry as a whole and a closer look at why even "happy" eggs may not be that happy after all.

[note: to give you an idea of what labels such as "organic", "cage-free" and "free-range" mean, see annex 1]

The egg industry

The current demand for eggs cannot be met without factory farms, which means that while the "happy" labels exist, about 99% of egg production is still the result of the worst conditions possible (for a detailed look at animal agriculture and its statistics, check out the book *Eating Animals* by Jonathan Safran Foer).

One of the common practices in the egg industry is called "**debeaking**". Chickens' beaks contain a lot of nerve endings and are extremely sensitive. Since they have a natural need to roam freely and spread their wings, being confined to almost no space at all, they develop nervous behaviors like pecking each other. In order to avoid or minimize this, their sensitive beaks are sliced off without anesthetics (the same happens with pigs' tails in the meat industry - pigs also have a need for space and may develop cannibalistic tendencies when under extreme stress).

Male chicks: chickens raised for eggs are anatomically different from those raised for meat (because they've been genetically modified to be different), so male chicks born in the egg industry are essentially useless as they can't produce eggs and will never grow big enough to be profitable. The cheapest and most convenient way to take care of this is to kill them right after birth. They are therefore either suffocated in a big plastic bag or ground alive. This happens across the board, often even when the eggs are labeled organic.

Why hens need to keep their eggs and even “happy” eggs are not really OK to eat

Hens only lay eggs until they have a full nest. So, while egg laying is indeed part of their natural cycle and not harmful per se, every time you take an egg, the hen will produce another one. That process takes a lot of effort and involves a tremendous loss of calcium for her.

One way of not letting the egg “go to waste” and at the same time helping out the hen is to feed her unfertilized egg back to her. This may sound a little strange, but it is natural and really helps her get her calcium back. If you keep chickens in your backyard, you can help them by slightly cracking the unfertilized egg open, that way the hen will know that she can eat it. Keeping hens and not eat their eggs is no more a waste than not drinking your dog’s or cat’s milk. Hens are highly intelligent beings with a rich emotional life. They make great companions and instead losing a “provider”, you could gain a friend.

Why do we even eat eggs?

Protein. There is indeed protein in eggs (in some languages, like German, the word for protein, Eiweiß, literally translated even means “egg white”), but as show in some of the previous lessons, you do not need to rely on eggs for protein as there are plenty of plant-based sources.

Are eggs bad for us?

Eggs contain high levels of cholesterol, the overconsumption of which is directly linked to cardiovascular diseases. People who are at risk for heart disease (and everyone else for that matter) will benefit greatly from cutting cholesterol out of their diets. Luckily, plant-based foods, unlike animal products, do not contain any cholesterol.

As Susan Levin, MS, RD and director of nutrition education at the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM), puts it:

“Eggs have zero dietary fiber, and about 70 percent of their calories are from fat—a big portion of which is saturated. They are also loaded with cholesterol—about 213 milligrams for an average-sized egg. For reference, people with diabetes, cardiovascular disease, or high cholesterol should consume fewer than 200 milligrams of cholesterol each day. (Uh oh.) And, humans have no biological need to consume any cholesterol at all; we make more than enough in our own bodies.”

Why so much fat and cholesterol in such a tiny package? Think about it: eggs hold every piece of the puzzle needed to produce a new life. Within that shell lies the capacity to make feathers, eyes, a beak, a brain, a heart, and so on. It takes a lot of stuff to make such a complex being.

In addition to these excessive (for humans) natural components of an egg, other human-health hazards exist. Because eggshells are fragile and porous, and conditions on egg farms are crowded, eggs are the perfect host for salmonella—the leading cause of food poisoning in the U.S.” [click here to read more](#).

What to eat instead?

I'm not going to lie, I used to love eggs and I still miss the taste at times, so I understand wanting to recreate both the taste and texture of eggs. One of my favorite alternatives is using Kala Namak, a black salt that is rich in sulfur and therefore resembles the taste of cooked eggs. Sprinklings a bit of kala namak on a ripe avocado does the trick for me. You can also add it to tofu scramble (to get the yellow color, add turmeric or saffron). While you will obviously never be able to recreate the exact same taste and texture, you can get pretty close and if that means leaving chickens alone, I think that it's definitely good enough!

annex 1:

A GUIDE TO EGG CARTON LABELS

AMERICAN HUMANE CERTIFIED

- INCLUDES PRODUCERS OF CAGE-FREE BIRDS
- PERMITS THE USE OF CAGES FOR HOUSING EGG-LAYING HENS
- PROHIBITS FORCED MOLTING
- ALLOWS BEAK CUTTING

Animal Welfare APPROVED

- LIMITS FLOCK SIZE TO 500 BIRDS MAX
- REQUIRES SIZABLE RANGING AND FORAGING ACCESS TO OUTDOORS
- PROHIBITS THE USE OF ANIMAL BYPRODUCTS IN FEED
- PROHIBITS FORCED MOLTING
- PROHIBITS BEAK CUTTING

CERTIFIED HUMANE

- PROHIBITS CAGES
- REQUIRES SPACE TO ROAM AND PERFORM NATURAL BEHAVIORS
- PROHIBITS THE USE OF ANIMAL BYPRODUCTS IN FEED
- PROHIBITS THE USE OF GROWTH PROMOTERS
- ALLOWS BEAK CUTTING

ANTIBIOTIC-FREE: RAISED WITHOUT ANTIBIOTICS

- PROHIBITS THE USE OF ANTIBIOTICS IN FEED OR WATER DURING GROWTH PERIOD OF PULLETS OR WHILE HENS ARE LAYING EGGS
- DOCUMENTATION MUST BE PROVIDED TO PROVE HENS WERE RAISED WITHOUT ANTIBIOTICS

FOOD ALLIANCE CERTIFIED

- PROHIBITS CAGES
- REQUIRES SPACE TO ROAM AND ACCESS TO NATURAL LIGHT
- PROHIBITS FORCED MOLTING
- ALLOWS BEAK CUTTING

OMEGA-3 ENRICHED

- ALLOWS CAGES
- FEED RICH IN OMEGA-3 FATTY ACIDS (PASTURED EGGS HAVE UP TO TWICE THE AMOUNT OF OMEGA-3S OF FACTORY-FARMED EGGS)

CAGE-FREE

- FREE SPACE TO ROAM BUT NO ACCESS TO SUNLIGHT
- ALLOWS BEAK CUTTING
- DOES NOT REGULATE FEED
- DOES NOT REGULATE ANTIBIOTIC USE

USDA ORGANIC CERTIFIED ORGANIC

- PROHIBITS CAGES
- PROHIBITS USE OF ANTIBIOTICS
- REQUIRES ACCESS TO OUTDOORS
- REQUIRES ORGANIC FEED
- ALLOWS BEAK CUTTING
- ALLOWS FORCED MOLTING

PASTURED PASTURE-RAISED/PASTURED

- REQUIRES HENS GET TO HUNT, PECK, AND GRAZE OUTDOORS (ON THEIR NATURAL DIETS)
- AVAILABLE AT FARMERS MARKETS (AND SOME SUPERMARKETS)
- 2007 MOTHER EARTH NEWS'S STUDY FOUND PASTURED HENS HAD 1/3 LESS CHOLESTEROL, 1/4 LESS SATURATED FAT, 2/3 MORE VITAMIN A, 2 TIMES MORE OMEGA-3-FATTY ACIDS, 3 TIMES MORE VITAMIN E, AND 7 TIMES MORE BETA CAROTENE
- NOT BE REGULATED OR ENFORCED

FREE-RANGE FREE-RANGE/FREE-ROAMING

- PROHIBITS CAGES
- REQUIRES ACCESS TO OUTDOORS (SMALL DOOR OR CONCRETE SLAB COUNTS)
- DOES NOT REGULATE FEED

UNITED EGG PRODUCERS CERTIFIED

- LOGO APPEARS ON A LOT OF SUPERMARKET EGGS—AND BASICALLY MEANS THEY'RE SUPERMARKET EGGS
- LAID BY HENS KEPT IN TINY CAGES

NO HORMONES ADDED HORMONE-FREE

- MARKETING GIMMICK
- EGG-LAYING HENS ARE NOT GIVEN HORMONE

VEGETARIAN FED VEGETARIAN-FED/VEGETARIAN

- PROHIBITS ANIMAL BYPRODUCTS IN FEED

Natural NATURAL

- MARKETING GIMMICK
- ALL EGGS ARE "NATURAL"