

Eggs Explained

How much do labels really tell you about how eggs are produced?



	Cage	Barn laid & RSPCA approved	Certified free range (2) & RSPCA Approved Outdoor (1)	Certified organic and Humane Choice (3)
Are hens confined in cages?	YES	NO	NO	NO
Are hens provided with a nest/perch?	NO	YES	YES	YES
Do hens have space to flap their wings/exercise?	NO	YES restricted (4)	YES	YES
Do hens have access to an outdoor range?	NO	NO	YES	YES
Are hens allowed to be 'debeaked'?	YES	YES	MAYBE depends on certification body (3)	NO
Are male chicks killed at birth?*	YES	YES	YES	YES
Are hens sent to slaughter from 18 months old?*	YES	YES	YES	YES

There is no doubt that consumer awareness and concern about the lives led by animals raised for food is on the rise. Ethical concerns are playing an increasingly important role in purchasing decisions. It seems that egg producers — perhaps more than any other — have responded to this trend by adding an abundance of confusing claims on egg cartons.

With no consistent or legally enforceable definitions for egg production systems in Australia, it's not easy to understand what the various logos and terms on packaging mean. Above we have attempted to demystify egg production systems in no-nonsense terms to help you make truly informed and kinder choices.

NOTE: Current demand for eggs in Australia can only be met by factory farming. But this demand never would have existed if people knew the truth about how animals are being treated. Now that you know, the power is in your hands. Refusing factory farmed products is an important first step. **But to end factory farming, animals urgently need caring consumers to also make the choice to consume fewer animal products.** Every person who replaces some or all of the eggs they eat with animal-friendly alternatives helps reduce the demand that has forced animals to be so intensively farmed, bringing hens a step closer to a world without factory farming.

1) 'RSPCA Approved'

The RSPCA Approved system accredits egg farms to RSPCA standards. Barn laid eggs can be RSPCA Approved, therefore not all RSPCA Approved farms allow hens access to an outdoor area. The description 'barn laid', 'free range' or 'outdoor' on RSPCA Approved egg cartons will indicate if the hens had access to the outdoors or were confined indoors (barn laid). 'Debeaking' of hens is not prohibited under the RSPCA's system.

Turn the page for more detailed explanations of the table above.

2) 'Free Range'

Unfortunately, there is no legal definition of the term free range in Australia so standards between free range egg farms can vary dramatically. The biggest difference between free range farms is the number of birds kept in a certain space. While 1,500 birds per hectare is the recommended maximum, this is not enforceable and large scale producers are keeping their hens at much higher densities to cash in on the growing market for free range products. Queensland is the only state that has legislated a maximum of 1,500 hens per hectare. These logos on the egg carton indicate the eggs have come from hens raised on a true free range farm.



**** Note:** The RSPCA logo alone does not guarantee free range — you may also find the RSPCA logo on barn-laid eggs (see above). Only cartons that are also labelled 'free range' contain RSPCA approved eggs from a true free range system.

3) 'Organic and Humane Choice'

Certified organic eggs come from hens kept on farms which meet and exceed standards of the best free range facilities. However, simply the word 'organic' on an egg carton can sometimes mislead people to think the welfare of hens meets certified organic standards — when it may merely mean that hens in barns are fed organic grains. These logos on the egg carton indicate that the hens are raised on a certified organic farm.

Humane Choice is the certification scheme launched by Humane Society International to improve the welfare standards of farmed animals. For consumers who do choose to purchase eggs and are searching for the most humane products, you can visit the Humane Choice website (<http://luks.co/WUw>) for more details.



4) 'Barn Laid'

Hens in barn laid housing systems are not confined in cages so in theory they can move around. However, high stocking densities restrict hens' ability to move freely and exercise. Being confined indoors restricts hens' ability to perform the normal behaviours that provide quality of life.

Other claims on egg cartons

There are many other marketing terms used on egg cartons to imply higher welfare. These labels should be read discerningly. Terms such as 'Vegetarian', 'Eco eggs' and 'Omega 3 eggs' for example are not recognised descriptors that define the type of housing system or a level of welfare for hens. The term 'Cage-free' is also regularly used but it is important to note that these hens are raised in barns and do not have access to the outdoors. Likewise, don't be fooled by clever imagery — some cartons may depict birds sitting on nests, or green rolling fields, but unless accompanied by an accreditation label, these images are most likely to be inaccurate.

*Ethical concerns in all egg laying systems

It is important that consumers are aware that there are ethical and welfare issues common to all egg production systems — including free-range and organic. All egg systems are faced with a universal 'problem' when it comes to the hatching of chicks raised for egg laying. Since only female chickens lay eggs, male chicks who have no commercial value to the egg industry are routinely gassed or 'macerated' (ground up alive). As a result, every year some 12 million male chicks are killed in the first day of their lives as waste products of the Australian egg industry. Another common concern is the slaughter of layer hens years short of their natural life span. Hens will naturally live for around 10 years, but most layer hens in Australia are sent to slaughter as soon as they exceed their productive 'use by date'. In all egg production systems, from cage to free range, hens are considered 'spent' from just 18 months old. Occasionally however, if it's deemed commercially viable, hens in free-range systems will be kept on for another season which would extend their life for around 12 months — still well short of what nature intended.

Alternatives to eggs

As consumers become aware of the ethical issues relating to all egg laying systems, more and more are choosing egg replacement products which are readily available in supermarkets (www.bit.ly/1qUFy2L).

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