

Factfile



Why go cage-free?

Hens need to walk, run, fly, scratch, dust-bathe and peck. But most of the UK's 36 million laying hens (about 6 million in Scotland) live in cages stacked in windowless sheds containing tens of thousands birds or more.

The conventional battery system – where four hens were kept in a metal cage no bigger than a microwave oven – has been banned in Europe since January 2012. But hens can still be confined in “enriched” cages for their entire lives, with only a little more space, a nest box and a perch.

Several EU states have not even fully implemented the ban on conventional batteries. Cakes, biscuits, pasta or mayonnaise and other foods may well be made with imported processed egg from this illegal system.

Alternatives to cages

Free-range hens may be kept outdoors or in a large shed with an outside area. In large densely stocked units, so many hens are kept that they rarely get close to the outside access points and do not venture outside.

Barn eggs are from hens kept uncaged in large sheds, usually with perches, plus floor space with litter. Nest boxes are provided and there may be natural light but they are still crowded and have no outdoor access.

Organic hens must be kept free-range, with more generous space allowances.

What can you do?

- If you buy eggs, or anything containing eggs, go for organic if you can
- Ask shops to supply only cage-free eggs. Most large UK supermarkets now have a cage-free policy. Tesco, Morrison and Asda continue to sell caged eggs although they have committed to stop selling them by 2025
- Check packaging of food containing egg and make sure it says organic or at least free-range
- Make a regular donation to support OneKind campaigns