

*News Article*

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## Understanding agriculture: poultry

If you are one who is perplexed by simple questions about agriculture that you don't understand, read on. Today's article is a primer on poultry, written primarily for the curious non-farmer.

I won't get into the philosophical question about what came first, the chicken or the egg, but I will cover simple scientific principles related to poultry.

First of all, the term "poultry" covers several types of birds, also called fowl. These include chickens, ducks, turkeys, geese and others. We'll concentrate on chickens today, the most common form of poultry used for human consumption.

There are several breeds of chickens today, with a wide array of colors, sizes, and characteristics. In total, there are over 150 breeds of poultry and 340 different color combinations! Some breeds are best known for their egg-laying ability, while others are known primarily for their meat production.

Several terms are used in chicken production. A mature female is called a hen, and a mature male is called a rooster or cock. An immature female (less than 12 months old) is called a pullet, and an immature male (less than 12 months old) is called a cockerel. A castrated male is called a capon. A newly hatched bird is called a chick.

The "fried chicken" many of us enjoy is the meat of chickens. Meat-type birds in production are called broilers, fryers or roasters. Broilers or fryers are younger chickens (4-8 weeks, average of six weeks old) of either sex about 6.5 pounds or less. A roaster is an older chicken (after 8 weeks, usually about 10-12 weeks old) of either sex that has tender meat with a soft, pliable, smooth textured skin, and 6.5 to 10 pounds. Most broilers are Cornish Cross breed. Ages may vary according to the production system used.

Chickens are social animals. In a short amount of time, a poultry flock will establish a "pecking order," a term we humans sometimes use. Once established, the hierarchy keeps squabbles at a minimum.

Of course, the eggs we eat come from hens. It takes a hen 23-32 hours to form and lay an egg, averaging around 26 hours. So, hens can lay about (but not quite) one egg per day. If roosters are present in a flock, eggs laid may develop into chicks, and they hatch in about 21 days.

Colors of eggs will vary, depending on the breed of chicken. Eggs may appear white, cream, brown, green or blue. Chickens with white ear lobes typically lay white eggs. White Leghorns (pronounced "leggerns") are prolific layers of white eggs. The color of the egg has nothing to do with egg quality – that is largely determined by diet, genetics, environment and age of the bird.

Eggs in the grocery store for consumption are infertile eggs, meaning that they would never develop into a chick. According to U.S. Department of Agriculture, one large egg has 75 calories, provides 6 grams of protein, and contains other important vitamins and minerals. Of course, there are also many excellent local sources of eggs available from individual farmers.

Poultry consumers have heard a number of terms bandied about. Among these are free range, natural, organic, no hormones added, antibiotic-free, all-vegetable diet, etc. For this article, I will comment on just two of these terms, with information from the Indiana State Poultry Association. Despite what you may hear, no artificial or added hormones are used in the production of poultry in the United States. And, all chicken is "antibiotic-free" in the sense that no antibiotic

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residues are present in the meat, due to the withdrawal periods and other precautions required by the government and observed by chicken companies. For a complete discussion of these and other terms, and what they really mean, visit: <http://www.inpoultry.com/chickens/>.

According to USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, Indiana Field Office, in 2016, Indiana poultry producers sold 8,910,000,000 eggs at a total value of \$403,938,000 from 30,467,000 laying hens. According to the most recent USDA Ag Census (2012), Indiana poultry producers sold 41,579,130 broilers in that year.

For more information, access Purdue Extension's poultry page at: <https://ag.purdue.edu/ansc/poultry/>, or Indiana State Poultry Association at: <http://www.inpoultry.com/>. Most of the above information was sourced from these two sites and other university-based resources.

*Curt Campbell, Purdue Extension Educator, Wabash County, contributed to this article.*