

Laying Hens & Whole Eggs FAQ

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What are “cage-free” eggs?

The term “cage-free” has no legal or formal definition, but it usually means that hens are not confined in individual crates, known as battery cages. In the early 1990s, “cage-free” became the marker of more humanely sourced eggs. It was a step in the right direction, but eventually became just the new baseline standard adopted by large corporations. Eggs in cartons marked “cage-free” frequently come from hens kept in over-crowded hen houses where they still do not have access to the outdoors. Under these conditions, despite having slightly more space to move, hens still experience negative health outcomes, cannot express many of their natural behaviors, aggression and pecking can be rampant, as well as the risk of communicable diseases.^{i,ii}

What are “free-range” eggs?

Eggs marked free-range come from hens that have access to outdoors, but the interpretation of what constitutes “outdoor access” is not legally or universally defined. For example, some egg producers might only provide a small concrete porch as “outdoor access,” where others provide open access to pasture. Outside of specific certifications, such as [Certified Humane](#), which stipulates two square feet of space per bird and at least six hours of outdoor access per day, for an operation to be called “free-range,” there are no requirements or standards for what type of outdoor access constitutes free-range or for how long they should be allowed to access it each day.

What are “pastured” eggs?

Again, definitions can differ, but all focus on access to outdoor space. Most certifications, and producer claims, imply significant outdoor time on pastureland with living vegetation and a substantial amount of space per hen (e.g., 108 square feet). Hens raised on pastures can express more of their natural behaviors, like foraging for insects or scratching at the ground. Birds also get more exercise, have lower incidence of disease and health complications, and maintain healthier social structures, because they are not crowded and stressed. Aside from animal welfare benefits, research shows that eggs from pastured hens are more nutritious, with greater amounts of Vitamin E and omega-3 fatty acids.ⁱⁱⁱ

What is PCC’s standard for eggs?

[PCC’s egg laying hen standard](#) requires that birds have access to outdoors and are not simply labeled “free-range” on the carton. Our standard includes details on housing, type and duration of outdoor access, nutrition, handling, and transportation of hens. Our merchandisers invest significant time and energy seeking out and developing strong relationships with smaller, local producers that can meet our standard. PCC also requires all vendors to complete a checklist verifying all practices to ensure they meet our standards. Lastly, PCC encourages the use of third-party certifications, like USDA Organic, Certified Humane, and [Animal Welfare Approved](#). To learn more about PCC’s journey to developing our standard, see the *Sound Consumer* article, [PCC Sets a New Standard for Sustainable Eggs](#).

Why are pastured and outdoor access eggs more expensive?

Eggs from hens raised in more sustainable and ethical environments, like those sold at PCC, have a price tag that more accurately reflects the costs of production. The price of conventional eggs has been artificially depreciated by the industry and by the advent of industrialized farming practices. In today's dollar, the cost of a dozen eggs in 1937 would have been \$6.40 and in 1947, \$8.16.^{iv} With the introduction of the inhumane and industrialized production practices of the 1960s, the price fell and has remained below \$2 per dozen. While those eggs are low cost on the shelf, the animal welfare and environmental costs are high. To learn more about this issue and history, please check out the *Sound Consumer* article, [The True Cost of Eggs](#).

ⁱ Karin Brulliard, "Many People Think a Cage-Free Life Is Better for Hens. It's Not That Simple.," *Washington Post*, June 15, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/animalia/wp/2017/06/15/many-people-think-cage-free-life-is-better-for-hens-its-not-that-simple/>.

ⁱⁱ "The Welfare of Layer Hens in Cage and Cage-Free Housing Systems" (RSPCA Australia, August 2016), http://www.animalwelfarestandards.net.au/files/2015/07/FINAL_2016-08-The-welfare-of-layer-hens-in-cage-and-cage-free-housing-systems-FINAL.pdf.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Research Shows Eggs from Pastured Chickens May Be More Nutritious | Penn State University," Penn State, July 20, 2010, <https://news.psu.edu/story/166143/2010/07/20/research-shows-eggs-pastured-chickens-may-be-more-nutritious>.

^{iv} Karen Gaudette Brewer, "The True Cost of Eggs," *Sound Consumer (PCC Community Markets)*, November 2019, <https://www.pccmarkets.com/sound-consumer/2019-11/the-true-cost-of-eggs/>.