

Food From Farm Animals

ANIMAL MATTERS

Eating lower on the food chain (eating fewer animals and animal products) reduces stress on the environment and can be better for personal health, not to mention animal welfare. Customer demand for cheap food doesn't stop with vegetables: in fact, meat, dairy and eggs are one of the largest components of the commercial agricultural system. As with "organics," there are a lot of terms used to describe feeding and handling practices used. It's important to understand these terms when you're considering what eggs to use for your egg salad, cream to use in your coffee, and meat to serve (or not serve) at a special event.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United States (FAO), 56 billion animals (not including fish) are slaughtered globally each year in the meat, dairy, and egg industries. Most of these animals are raised in conventional, industrial agriculture systems known as factory farms or, less commonly, concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs). While these systems are designed to maximize productivity and profit for the producer, they create serious welfare problems for animals. Below you'll find a species by species guide of what you need to know to make food choices that better fit your values.

LIVES OF ANIMALS

Cattle Raised for Dairy:

All cows typically live together in herds and on grasslands, where they spend most of their time grazing. They form strong friendships and family bonds, and recent science has shown that, like in humans, their stress levels (interpreted from heart rates) are lowered when around a preferred partner as compared with a random individual. Although very social animals, most of today's dairy cows live in confined operations where they have limited or no movement, socialization, or access to the outdoors. The dairy cow of today has been artificially and genetically selected to produce up to 12 times the amount of milk needed to feed her calf. Low-welfare breeding practices lead to lameness and other painful conditions in dairy cows, who are slaughtered after 3-4 pregnancy cycles. By contrast, in a traditional pastoral system, a dairy cow's life span could reach 25 years or more.

Like humans, dairy cows produce milk as a result of pregnancy and giving birth. Female calves are typically kept for dairy production, while males are taken away from their mother at a young age and are slaughtered at 16-18 weeks. While some veal farmers allow calves to live in groups, many confine calves to small, solitary stalls where they cannot explore, groom, exercise, or bond with other animals—behaviors crucial for natural development. Calves typically suffer from disease and high levels of stress during their short lives. Because of this, high-welfare certification programs such as Animal Welfare Approved do not certify veal operations.

Cows are routinely fed growth hormones to increase their milk production. The effects of these hormones on people are not fully known, but many people seek to avoid them. The dairy industry has also seen massive consolidation, with low milk prices causing the near collapse of a once-thriving family farm sector in the Northeast. Buying milk from "grass-fed" or "pasture-raised" cows "never treated with rBST" means that you're avoiding extra hormones, and supporting farmers who are taking good care of their animals.

There are higher-welfare alternatives to conventional dairy products and higher-welfare certifications to look for; see appendices I and II.

Interested in dairy alternatives? We are lucky to live in a time where plant-based (e.g., soy, almond, coconut, flax) milk and other dairy alternatives (for yogurt, cheese, ice creams, dips, and spreads) are widely available in many major and smaller stores across the country.

Cattle Raised for Beef:

Most cattle raised for beef start their lives on the range and are allowed to graze and socialize, making their experience much better in comparison to other conventionally raised farm animals. However, almost all cattle spend approximately the last six months of life in feedlots, where they are fattened on grain and kept in dirty, crowded, unnatural conditions. Also, conventional cattle systems allow for painful mutilations, such as dehorning, branding, and sometimes tail docking (although this is typically associated with dairy farming)—all without the use of anesthetics or analgesics.