

# Meat chickens (1)

Chickens reared for meat (sometimes known as *broilers*) are descended from the junglefowl of Asia, and were probably first domesticated by humans about 6,000 to 10,000 years ago. In recent times, meat chickens have been bred to grow very quickly so as to produce the maximum amount of meat in the minimum amount of time. Despite this strong selective breeding, modern chicken breeds still have the motivation to carry out many of the behaviours their wild ancestors did.

## Some natural chicken behaviours include:

- **perching** – in the wild, chickens will seek safety from predators at night by perching in trees. This behaviour also helps to conserve body heat because the chickens huddle close together. Chickens therefore like to perch, and providing facilities to allow birds to perform this behaviour also allows them the opportunity to do this
- **investigating** – chickens are inquisitive animals and like to explore their environment by, for example, pecking at interesting objects and scratching at the ground
- **dustbathing** – chickens find a dry material (such as fine soil) and bathe in it by fluffing up their feathers, squatting on the ground and making tossing, rubbing and shaking movements with their body, wings, head and legs. This helps to remove parasites and keep their skin and feathers in good condition
- **comfort, exercise and grooming behaviours** – these include preening, feather ruffling, head scratching, body shaking and wing stretching and flapping.

## Did you know?

- More meat chickens are farmed in the UK than any other type of farmed animal – around 830 million each year.
- 50 years ago, a chicken would typically have taken 12 weeks to reach its slaughter weight, but due to selective breeding to encourage rapid growth, some now reach this at a little over five weeks.
- Recent scientific studies suggest that chickens are much more intelligent than commonly thought. Chickens make about 20 different types of vocalisations with specific meanings, including different alarm calls for different predators. It is also thought that they can recognise particular individuals in their social group.

# Meat chickens (2)

## Key welfare issues

The RSPCA's welfare concerns about meat chickens are centred in four main areas.

- **The fast growth rate** – this can lead to health problems such as lameness and heart defects.
- **Stocking density** – this relates to the number of chickens kept on a given floor space and is expressed as bird weight per square metre. High stocking densities can lead to poor welfare by hindering birds exercising properly and performing natural behaviours, and also by causing the condition of the air and litter (flooring material) to become poor.
- **Lighting** – light levels are usually measured in 'lux', for example, a brightly lit room is around 400 lux, and natural daylight is around 30,000 to 100,000 lux. In contrast, many meat chickens are reared in light levels of around 10 lux. At low light levels birds are less active, which can contribute to the development of lameness and eye abnormalities. Meat chickens may also be reared under near-continuous low light levels, as this encourages them to feed for longer periods, which maximises their growth rate. There is scientific evidence showing that preventing meat chickens from having a proper dark period contributes to a poorer quality of life.
- **Environmental enrichment** – the majority of chickens do not have items in their environment that promote the expression of their natural behaviours such as perching and investigation. A more stimulating, enriched environment encourages birds to be more active, which can help reduce leg problems. Chickens provided with an enriched environment (for example, containing straw bales, perches and objects to peck at) walk and run more and sit down less than those kept without any form of enrichment.

The risk of all the above welfare problems occurring can be greatly reduced by rearing chickens to higher welfare standards such as our *RSPCA welfare standards*, which are required from producers who display the RSPCA Assured logo.