CHICKEN FACT SHEET

Chickens form strong family ties. A mother hen begins bonding with her chicks before they are even born. She will turn her eggs as many as five times an hour and softly cluck to her unborn chicks, who will chirp back to her and to one another. After they are hatched, the devoted mother dotes over her brood, teaching them what to eat, how to drink, where to roost, and how to avoid enemies.

Male chickens (called roosters) are most famous for greeting each sunrise with loud crows, often acting as alarm clocks for farmers.

Chickens are fascinating creatures. They have more bones in their necks than giraffes, yet they have no teeth. They swallow their food whole and use a part of their stomach called the gizzard to grind it up.

Chickens actually have many similarities to humans: the majority are right-footed (just as most humans are right-handed), they see a similar color range, and they love to watch television. Many also enjoy classical music, preferring the faster symphonies to the slower ones.

Having a private nest in which to lay eggs is extremely important to hens. The desire is so strong, in fact, that a hen will often go without food and water, if necessary, to use a nest. The nest-building process is fascinating. A hen will first scratch a shallow hole in the ground, then reach out to pick up twigs and leaves, which she drops onto her back. After she has gathered some material, she'll settle back in the hole and let the material fall off around the rim. She will continue to do this until her nest is completed.

As highly social animals, chickens can bond very closely to other animals, including humans. They will fight to protect their family and will mourn when a loved one is lost. When they have bonded with a human, chickens will often jump into his or her lap to get a massage that they enjoy fully with their eyes closed, giving every indication of being in ecstasy.

"It's just a chicken" is a retort heard often when concern for the welfare of chickens is exhibited. This comment reflects just how misunderstood these animals are. Chickens are just as deserving of our respect and compassion as are all other animals.
FACTORY FARMING

Life on "Old MacDonald's Farm" isn't what it used to be. The green pastures and idyllic barnyard scenes portrayed in children's books are quickly being replaced by windowless metal sheds, wire cages, "iron maidens," and other confinement systems integral to what is now known as "factory farming." Simply put, the factory farming system of modern agriculture strives to produce the most meat, milk, and eggs as quickly and cheaply as possible, and in the smallest amount of space possible. Cows, calves, pigs, chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, rabbits, and other animals are kept in small cages or stalls, often unable to turn around. They are deprived of exercise so that all of their bodies' energy goes toward producing flesh, eggs, or milk for human consumption. They are fed growth hormones to fatten them faster and are genetically altered to grow larger or to produce more milk or eggs than nature originally intended. Because crowding creates a prime atmosphere for disease, animals on factory farms are fed and sprayed with huge amounts of pesticides and antibiotics, which remain in their bodies and are passed on to the people who eat them, creating serious human health hazards.

Chickens are divided into two groups: layers and broilers. Five to six laying hens are kept in a 14-inch-square mesh cage, and cages are often stacked in many tiers. Conveyor belts bring in food and water and carry away eggs and excrement.

Because the hens are severely crowded, they are kept in semi-darkness and their beaks are cut off with hot irons (without anesthetics) to keep them from pecking each other to death. The wire mesh of the cages rubs their feathers off, chafes their skin, and cripples their feet.

Approximately 20 percent of the hens raised under these conditions die of stress or disease. At the age of one to two years, their overworked bodies decline in egg production and they are slaughtered (chickens would normally live 15-20 years). Ninety percent of all commercially sold eggs come from chickens raised on factory farms.

More than six billion "broiler" chickens are raised in sheds each year. Lighting is manipulated to keep the birds eating as often as possible, and they are killed after only nine weeks. Despite the heavy use of pesticides and antibiotics, up to 60 percent of chickens sold at the supermarket are infected with live salmonella bacteria.

Genetic selection to keep up with demand and also reduce production costs, causes extremely painful joint and bone conditions, making any movement difficult. Broiler chickens may suffer from dehydration, respiratory diseases, bacterial infections, heart attacks, crippled legs, and other serious ailments.

Factory farming is an extremely cruel method of raising animals, but its profitability makes it popular. One way to stop the abuses of factory farming is to support legislation that abolishes battery cages, veal crates, and intensive-confinement systems. Shop locally at small farms that use more humane methods.

The best way to save animals from the misery of factory farming is to stop or reduce your consumption of meat, milk, and eggs.