

RESPONSIBLE SOURCING



Production process

TURKEYS

Production process

TURKEYS

RESPONSIBLE
SOURCING

Animal welfare considerations

- Fast growth rates
- Husbandry procedures such as dewinging, desnooding, toe clipping
- Intensive farming practices
- Poor lighting
- Poor litter management
- Where given outdoor access, poor quality ranges

Definitions

Breeder bird – the male or female turkey who produces eggs to be hatched into the turkeys that are grown out for consumption.

Poults – newly hatched turkey.

Hens – female adult turkey.

Toms – male adult turkey.



Turkeys are sociable, curious, and quirky creatures. Domesticated turkeys today are descended from several turkey subspecies originating from Mexico. A turkey's natural lifespan can be up to 10 years, however in commercial turkey meat production they will be slaughtered at 10–18 weeks.

There are two breeds available for commercial production in Australia known as the Hybrid and the Nicholas.

There is no commercial egg industry in Australia, so turkey eggs are imported from the USA (Nicholas) and Canada (Hybrid) by the two companies that hold the largest number of breeder stock in Australia (Baiaida and Ingham's). Turkey breeder hens are 7 months old when they start laying eggs. Because these birds are genetically selected to grow very quickly, the weight of breeder birds is controlled by restricting or formulating a special feed, meaning breeders birds may be left chronically hungry. Male birds (called 'toms') still become too heavy (due to the large area of breast muscle) to mate naturally, so females (or 'hens') are artificially inseminated.

Breeder hens can produce up to 105 eggs over a 28-week laying period, after which hens are no longer considered profitable and are then slaughtered. Breeding hens are vaccinated for common diseases such as haemorrhagic enteritis, cholera and fowl pox; this provides immunity to the poults (turkey chicks) who are normally not vaccinated. Eggs from the breeder birds (or 'parent flock') are transported to the major hatcheries, where eggs are incubated for a period of 28 days.

Within hours of hatching, poults are sorted by sex and may be subjected to various husbandry procedures at the hatchery including beak trimming and toe trimming.

Beak trimming is routinely done to prevent injurious pecking on farm. Using an infra-red laser, the tip of the beak is lasered causing it to erode away as the bird eats. Toe trimming may also be done using an infra-red laser to remove the tip of the toe to prevent regrowth of the nail.

Day-old turkeys, known as poults, are transported from the hatchery to the growing facility within a period of 72 hours after hatching.

At this stage, they weigh between 40 to 60 grams. Depending on the location of the growing facility, poults are either transported by road or by air. Both male and female birds are grown out for meat.

For the first four weeks or so, poults are usually kept in a 'brooding area' within a shed. This is a confined area of the shed where they can be kept warm under brooding lights and easily find food and water. At the end of the brooding period, birds are given access to the entire shed.

In the shed, birds are usually housed with bedding on the floor such as wood shavings, chopped straw or rice hulls. The lighting, temperature and ventilation of the sheds are controlled to promote growth. One shed may house 8–14,000 birds, with male and female birds usually separated by a barrier in the shed. Birds remain in the shed until they reach slaughter weight.

Turkeys raised in conventional systems spend their life in barren, cramped and dimly-lit environments. Birds are discouraged from moving about and eat continuously, gaining weight rapidly which causes severe welfare problems, including leg disorders, ascites and in some cases heart failure. Turkeys may also suffer from leg weakness, joint problems and bone fractures. Due to their rapid and heavy weight gain, birds may have difficulty in accessing feed and water. As birds will have increased contact with the litter they are likely to suffer hock and foot burn if not provided with quality litter than is managed correctly.

As birds are reared in sheds with high stocking densities, they have less space to move and therefore less opportunity to express natural behaviours resulting in frustration and an increased chance of lameness. The barren environment and lack of enrichment may also cause injurious feather pecking and cannibalism. Poor lighting in the shed can also result in birds developing eye abnormalities.

Turkeys have been selected to grow more muscle in the breast and thighs and reach slaughter weight very quickly. Hens reach slaughter weight at around 10 weeks old (5-6 kg), whereas toms will grow to around 18 weeks (7–11 kg) or more. The weight at which birds are slaughtered depends on customer requirements.

Birds are harvested by 'pick-up crews'. Harvesting usually occurs in darkness to help keep birds calm and involves catching birds by hand and placing them in transport crates or modules. The catching process may cause the birds pain since they are caught by the legs, and turkeys frequently experience leg disorders and painful joint conditions. The transport crates or modules are loaded on to trucks for transport to the processing plant.

At the processing plant, turkeys are rested for up to 2 hours to allow them to settle from the transport journey. Turkeys are then removed from their crates and stunned (rendered unconscious) before slaughter using electrical waterbath stunning. This process involves birds being shackled upside down by their legs while they are conscious and then passing the bird's head through an electrical water bath which renders them unconscious. Upon lowering birds into the electrical waterbath they can be subjected to painful pre-stun shocks. Birds may also be ineffectively stunned depending on the electrical frequency in the waterbath, and the electrical resistance of each individual bird. Once unconscious, birds have their necks cut and are bled out to cause death prior to regaining consciousness.

Once they are dead, turkeys are plucked, cleaned and further processed either as whole birds or cut into pieces such as drumsticks, breasts, wings and thighs. They are then packaged for sale.

For more information visit the RSPCA's Knowledgebase kb.rspca.org.au