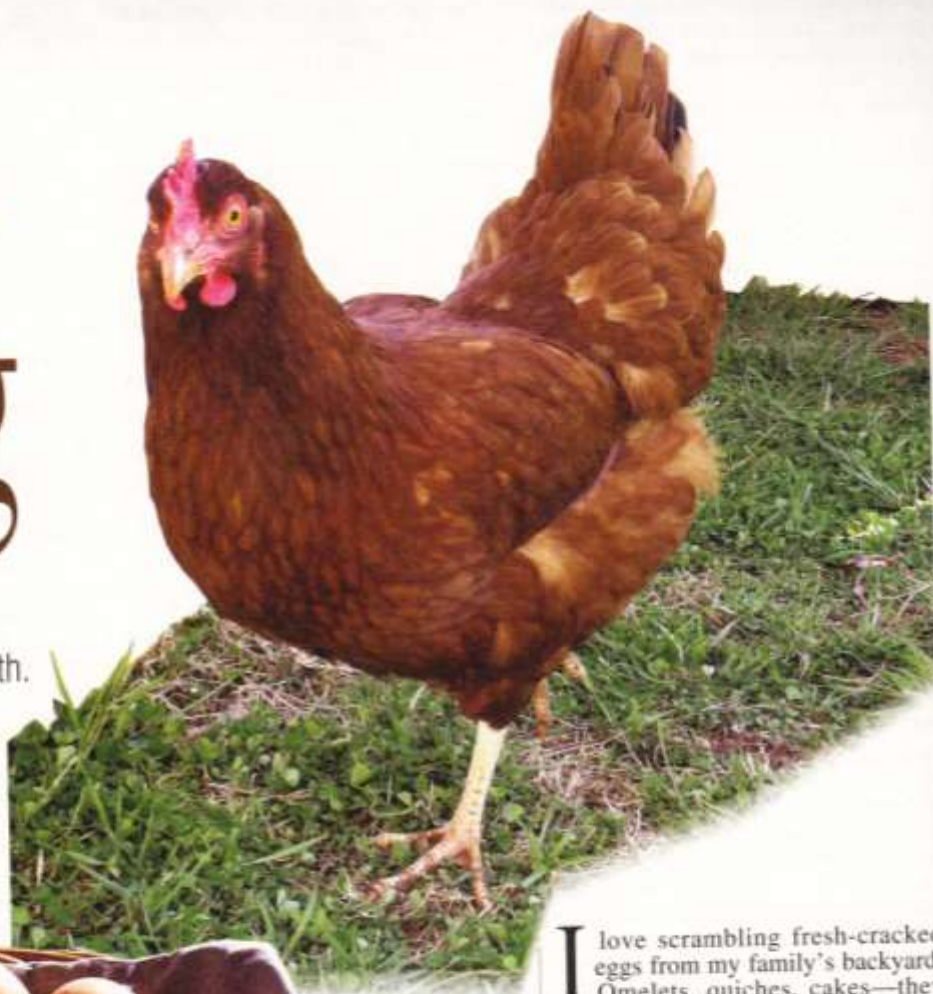


The Good Egg

Your hen's diet
affects your own health.

By
Tara Lynne Brown



PHOTOS SUPPLIED BY ALIHOH



I love scrambling fresh-cracked eggs from my family's backyard. Omelets, quiches, cakes—they can all be more nutritious when my chickens eat healthier too! Enjoying eggs from backyard chickens is one of the myriad benefits of owning chickens, including collecting eggs that are lower in cholesterol, higher in vitamin D and higher in omega-3 fatty acids. These nutritional benefits are achieved by making simple and affordable changes to your chickens' diet.

Poultry Feed

Our main feed is a mixed blend formulated for domesticated chickens. It's important to check the content of your feed. "Some people use cracked corn and feeds with beef fat. They don't realize that the fat content makes

fat hens, and fat hens don't lay well," said Bob Davis, a chicken owner for more than 50 years. He's an enthusiastic backyard chicken advocate in Raleigh, North Carolina, who organizes an annual event promoting backyard chicken ownership, the Tour D'Coop. When you experience chickens pecking at each other, it's a sign that they are bored . . . or their diet needs variety. Davis advised, "Feathers are made up of protein. When chickens are fat and crave protein, they look to the closest chicken's feathers to eat." Our chickens enjoy the earthworms we find by turning over rocks.

Inside the Egg

Eggs themselves are one of the best sources of protein, vitamin B₁₂, and iron. They are low in fat and only about 80 calories each. Dr. Kelly Robbins, professor in the Department of Animal Science with the University of Tennessee, said, "The nutrient content can vary with diet, but the only nutrients that are diet dependent are the type of fat, vitamins, and trace minerals." Dr. Robbins explained that calories, lipids, and protein levels are rather constant and differ based on egg size.

Best Diet for Chickens

The nutritional value of backyard chicken owners' eggs can be increased by providing the chickens a diet rich in variety. Plus, chickens that are fed a vegetarian diet produce eggs that are lower in cholesterol. Mixing canola oil into food offerings will also reduce the cholesterol present. Dr. Robbins suggests adding 3 percent canola oil to hens' diets. He said, "There is solid research that demonstrates that using dietary fat sources like canola oil in the hen's diet can cause a reduction in egg saturated fat, pretty much eliminate trans fat . . . and increase the level of omega-3 fatty acids." Adding algae and flaxseed to the chickens' feed also increases the eggs' content of omega-3 fatty acids. If you are highly concerned about cholesterol, you can always rely on one of my favorites: egg whites. They are completely void of cholesterol and saturated fat!

Growing up on a family farm with 1,000 laying hens, Peter Ferket, now a professor of poultry science, nutrition, and biotechnology with North Carolina State University in Raleigh, has a 22-year career revolving around nutrition and chickens. Ferket specifically changed his chickens' diet to reap the benefits of healthier eggs. This is achieved through a special feed formulation that produces more nutrients than what is possible with free-range eggs. "The only thing we cannot put into the egg by changing the commercial diet is how people feel about where they get their eggs." This social and ethical issue may be difficult for backyard chicken owners to explore as most enjoy collecting eggs from their own happy chickens' laying boxes.

Let the Sun Shine In and the Chickens Out

Offering chickens a run that allows them relief in shade and fun in the

sun can help boost their vitamin D levels. However, this boost is not as significant as one would believe. As Ferket points out, "If a person gets 15 minutes of sunlight exposure . . . they will produce more vitamin D in their own bodies than what they can get from eating an egg from a free-range chicken."

Just as humans are urged to eat a complete, balanced diet that incorporates all the food groups, the main key to producing more nutritious eggs is variety. In addition to giving the hens a store-bought feed, try offering fruit and vegetable scraps. To keep it simple, you can stay seasonal. Bob Davis reported that late in the fall his neighbors share their pumpkins and wilting jack-o'-lanterns as feed for his chickens.

It may not be the icing on the cake, but knowing that my next baking creation will be rich with healthier eggs in it makes dessert all the more enjoyable. 🐔



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