

The Chicken and the Egg

By Thomas A. Braun RPh

One of the basic mysteries of life is what came first, the chicken or the egg? We can't solve that question, but we can learn about how the chicken egg has evolved in the last 50 years.

Back in the 1950's I read an article in Scientific America about how a Professor of Animal Husbandry proposed a new way to mass produce chicken eggs for the American consumer. Basically, it took the chicken from the farmyard and sunlight to a mechanized feeding and growing production line inside metal barns a half block long with artificial lighting. It is not uncommon to have 10,000 to 30,000 chickens crammed into metal cages inside these metal barns.

The chickens are fed a diet that stimulates faster growth and they weigh more than the barnyard chicken of old. This concept was embraced by the chicken farmers, and today, the majority of the 75 billion eggs produced in the US are from the factory chicken production lines.

It was discovered early on, that 30% of the chickens were developing rickets and breaking their legs. In addition, the crowded cage conditions increased the risk of having a bird disease caused by pathogens to decimate the chicken population.

These problems were solved by adding Vitamin D to the feed to reverse the low Vitamin D level of the chickens due to sunlight deprivation. Secondly, antibiotics were added to the feed to reduce the risk of infectious diseases that can decimate a chicken flock. Currently, salmonella has become a major concern. In one massive recall in 2010, 550,000,000 eggs had to be recalled because they were tainted with salmonella and were causing sickness and sometimes death by the consumer who ate the eggs.

The production line approach to producing eggs does keep the cost of eggs down, but the down side is multi-fold. Eggs are a rich source of Vitamin D for the American consumer. Also, it is a rich source of Vitamin A, 3 omega fatty acids, vitamin e and beta-carotene and farm yard raised chickens are richer in these nutrients.

Currently, unless the egg farmer is enhancing his chicken feed beyond the amount of Vitamin D required to prevent rickets, the average egg yolk today only has 41 IU's of Vitamin D. In 1992, the egg yolk contained 146 IU's of Vitamin D. That's a 73% decrease in the value of Vitamin D. That is a loss of 70 IU's per daily dose of Vitamin D which is a key nutrient that the body converts to a hormone called calcitriol. Before the egg revolution that started in the 1950's the egg had a yolk much richer in Vitamin D than in 1992..

The feed is also spiked with antibiotics such as tetracycline, amoxicillin and quinolone class of antibiotics. Cipro is a quinolone type antibiotic which has been banned, due to its immune suppressing attributes. In some cases, you can identify chicken eggs that have been spiked with antibiotics by their dull color rather than their bright clear yellow yolk.

In Washington, the National Institute of Health has been slow in recognizing that modern farming techniques are contributing to the major loss of needed nutrients in our food supply. The Institute of Medicine 2011 changes to Vitamin D guidelines were a small step in the right direction. It is sad they felt that pregnant mothers needed no more Vitamin D than the average adult. Knowledgeable researchers believe pregnant mothers need 4,000 iu's per day so they deliver a healthy infant. Maybe our autism epidemic could be reversed. The Amish in Ohio have very few autistic children.

The travesty of 20th Century medicine is not to recognize the true value of Vitamin D and accept the fact that Americans in general are only receiving 50% of the Vitamin D that is required for good health. We can improve the health of all Americans quickly if we solve the epidemic Vitamin D deficiency that exists.

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