



**International Poultry Council
rue du Luxembourg 47-51, bte 2
1050 Brussels, Belgium**

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THE HORMONE MYTH

Many people think that modern commercial chickens grow so large because they are fed or injected with growth hormones. This has been repeated for so long and has been circulated so widely around the world that it has earned the name, “The Hormone Myth.”

While it is certainly true that modern commercially produced chickens are in some cases quite large, this is because of advanced breeding and genetics, not hormones – other than those that occur naturally in all living beings. Here’s why this is true.

First, and perhaps most important, in the majority of countries that produce poultry on a commercial scale, hormone use is either illegal, or is not approved for poultry.

Second, global commercial poultry production has made great strides over the last half century. Chickens are raised from chicks to mature birds in approximately six to seven weeks. Most commercial chicken companies around the world use chickens from breeding stock supplied by any of several major companies that produce hatching eggs and baby chicks from pure genetic lines of birds. Chicken companies sometimes cross-breed chickens from these genetic lines to achieve certain characteristics that they need for the markets they serve.

Third, different companies raise chickens for different purposes. Some of them produce smaller chickens that will be sold in supermarkets as whole birds, weighing about 2 kilograms. Some of the companies produce larger birds (up to 4 kg.) for maximum meat yield that are cut into pieces to supply the restaurant trade, which demands consistency in size. Some companies produce chickens to be cut up and sold fresh or frozen in retail stores, or to be packaged under different brand names, or to be exported to other countries. In other words, there is no “one size fits all” chicken.

The same is true for the global producers of turkeys and of ducks, although the time of growth to maturity varies. Over the last half century, the modern poultry industry has developed the unique ability to react and adjust quickly to varying market conditions and produce the types of products that consumers around the world demand.

As for what commercially produced chickens, turkeys, ducks and other commercial fowl eat, in most countries they are fed a natural diet that consists of corn and corn by-products, high-quality, high-protein soybean meal, with the remaining portion of the ration being minerals, vitamins, and other supplemental ingredients that meet the protein requirements of the bird. In some countries with limited availability of corn, producers feed their birds wheat or other locally available grains or protein-rich rations such as fish meal.

Following are some points to consider about the hormone issue:

1. Hormone use is either illegal or is not approved for use in poultry production in most countries. Further, using hormones would be ineffective and would not contribute to the growth of poultry.
2. Because growth hormone is a protein, like insulin, it would have to be injected instead of ingested, making administration difficult. Also, like insulin, the effects are temporary. A typical poultry house is populated by thousands of birds. Imagine the logistical issues (not to mention the high cost) of having to inject each bird several times during the birds' relatively short life cycle.
3. Hormones are ineffective, and do not lead to increased growth in chickens, according to poultry scientists. Growth is a complicated metabolic process, with no "magic bullet."
4. Growth hormones for poultry are not available commercially, and are simply not needed. The International Poultry Show, which is held in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, each year, attracts more than 20,000 visitors from 100 countries and 1,000 exhibitors comprised of companies that supply the global poultry industry. Of those exhibitors, NOT ONE markets hormones. They are simply NOT available.
5. Hormones are simply not needed. Over the last several decades, improved genetics, better nutrition, and improvements in production practices mean that commercial chickens reach market weight one day earlier each year than the previous year.

SOURCE: "The Hormone Myth," by Dr. Nick Dale, Professor Emeritus of Poultry Science, the University of Georgia. Originally published in 2005.