



# FREE RANGE

## IF NO BROILER CHICKENS ARE RAISED IN CAGES, WHAT DOES THE TERM FREE RANGE MEAN?

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture ([USDA](#)), free range means that chickens have access to the outdoors for at least some part of the day, whether the chickens choose to go outside or not. There are no requirements for length of time the chicken must spend outdoors, the size of the outdoor area or the type of groundcover. Less than 1% of chickens nationwide are raised as “free range,” [according to the National Chicken Council](#).

### IS IT BETTER FOR CHICKENS TO HAVE ACCESS TO THE OUTDOORS?

While the majority of chickens raised for meat in the U.S. are raised in large barns called “growout houses”, even free range chickens live in some variation of a chicken coup or house.

All chickens need [protection from predators and the outside elements](#). Free range chickens are provided varying degrees of shelter based on producer preference, and conventional chickens live in large, [open structures called growout houses](#) where they are free to walk around and commune with other chickens. In practice, most chickens stay close to water and feed, which is usually located inside the chicken house. [Young chickens need more shelter and temperature control](#) as they’re less able to regulate body temperature. As the chickens grow bigger and feather out, they require cooler temperatures to regulate body temperature.

### IS FREE RANGE CHICKEN ORGANIC?

Not all free range chicken is organic (chickens could be raised with access to the outdoors but not under any of the other criteria needed to be [certified organic](#)), but all organic chicken is free range (in order to receive [organic certification](#), chickens must have access to the outdoors, among other criteria).

Additionally, chickens raised in houses are just as healthy as free range chickens.

### LOOKING FOR MORE INFORMATION?

If you’re curious about what other labels you might find on packages of chicken meat, check out this [infographic on common chicken labeling terms](#).

See what an actual chicken growout house looks like in this video: [Housing and Ventilation Systems on the Farm](#).

Find out how chicken farmers ensure the flock stays biosecure and safe from predators in this video: [Biosecurity and Health Management](#).

**ROOST ROSTER**  
A glossary of chicken meat and food label terminology

The U.S. Department of Agriculture regulates and oversees the language on meat and poultry labels. Here are some terms commonly found on chicken packaging.

- All-Vegetarian or Vegetarian Diet:** Most poultry feed is made from corn and soybean meal, but some feeds also contain meat and poultry by-products, which are excellent sources of healthy vitamins, minerals and proteins. If the feed does not contain any of these products, it can be labeled "All-Vegetarian Diet" or "Vegetarian Feed."
- Farm-Raised:** All chickens raised in the U.S. for meat are farm-raised in spacious barns equipped with heating and water systems, and protection from any predators or external elements that could affect the health of the chickens.
- Organic:** Products carrying the "USDA Certified Organic" seal, regulated by USDA, mean the chicken has been fed only certified organic feed (corn and soybeans). The chicken is also not medicated and has not been given antibiotics — though it may have been vaccinated against common diseases. Most of the processing practices are the same for organic and conventional. The organic label does not indicate that the product's quality or nutritional attributes are any higher than the conventionally raised product.
- Antibiotics Claims:** All chicken you buy is technically antibiotic-free — federal rules state that if any antibiotics were used, they must have cleared the bird's system before they can leave the farm. Some chickens are raised without the use of antibiotics. In the store, these chicken packages may be labeled a number of different ways including "No Antibiotics Ever," "Raised Without Antibiotics" or similar terms.
- Free-Range:** Generally, "free-range" is included on a label when the chicken has access to the outdoors. But all free-range chicken is organic, but all organic chicken is free-range.
- Fresh:** "Fresh" means the temperature of whole poultry and cuts have never fallen below 26°F (the temperature at which poultry freezes, unlike water).
- Fast-Food Raised:** Chickens that are primarily raised on pasture.
- Retained Water:** A "retained water" statement, such as "May contain up to 5% retained water," is often found on packages of fresh poultry. USDA does not allow expansion of moisture in meat and poultry, except for any necessary shrinkage from essential safety procedures, such as chilling processed chickens in ice-cold water to keep them cool and slow the growth of any spoilage bacteria. If any moisture is retained by the chicken after chilling, it must be stated on the label.
- Cage Free:** Birds are raised in large, open barns in all states and have access to a store in raised cage-free, whether or labeled cage-free or not.
- Natural, Raised and Processed in the USA:** More than 99% of chicken sold in the U.S. comes from chickens that are raised and processed in the U.S. The only exception is a very small amount imported from Chile and Canada, which have food safety and quality standards equal to our own.
- Broiler:** A young chicken raised for meat. This is the most common found in your grocery.
- Natural:** Under USDA regulations, a "natural" product has no artificial flavors, preservatives, or colorings added, and is minimally processed.
- Cornish Hen:** A small broiler chicken harvested at a young age. It is not a game bird (which is a bird hunted for sport or food).
- Roaster:** A larger chicken of 5 lbs. or more and less than 12 weeks of age.
- Dark Meat:** The back half of the chicken, the legs (drumsticks) and thighs.
- No Added Hormones or Steroids:** Despite this label appearing on many chicken products found in the store, no chicken you buy in your grocery is ever given hormones or steroids. In fact, the use of such added or artificial hormones is prohibited by law by the FDA and this must be noted on the label.
- Enhanced:** A chicken product has been "enhanced" if it contains an added ingredient or ingredients for flavor, which typically include water, salt, sugar, chicken broth or seasonings, like garlic. If a product is enhanced, it must clearly say so on the front of the package, along with a list of every ingredient and how much of it was used.
- USDA Processed Verified:** Companies with approved USDA Process Verified Programs are able to make marketing claims associated with their processing methods, including practices, or other claims and processing claims and market themselves as "USDA Process Verified." Process Verified means that a company has been inspected and verified by the USDA in their area.
- White Meat:** The breast, tender and wing of the chicken.