Hen mortality rates in cage-free systems decline over time

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Video Byte

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Abstract

Laying hens are predominantly kept in small battery cages. These cages are so small, in fact, that the birds usually cannot extend their wings or exhibit other natural behaviors like foraging and nesting. Public criticism of this practice is driving egg producers to change to higher welfare cage-free aviaries. But there have been some claims that cage-free systems could have higher mortality rates than battery cages. A recent meta-analysis used data from 6,040 commercial flocks – 176 million birds – spanning 16 countries to investigate this claim. They found that, while mortality in cage-free flocks was higher in the past, it decreased over time. In fact, data from recent years shows no difference in mortality between caged and cage-free systems. The decrease in mortality likely reflects an increase in flock managers' experience. More research is needed into causes of death in different egg production systems. But these results are encouraging to egg producers transitioning to cage-free systems and highlight the importance of considering the maturity of a farming system when evaluating animal health, behavior, and welfare.