

Rethinking Stocking Density in Broilers: Assessments of Physiological, Behavioral, and Environmental Impacts

Md. Emran Hossain*

Abstract

High stocking density in broiler production is a common practice aimed at maximizing space utilization and economic returns. However, it poses significant challenges to the performance, health, and welfare of the birds. This study explores the multifaceted impacts of elevated stocking density on broiler chickens, highlighting the physiological, behavioral, and environmental factors that deteriorate their overall well-being. Increased stocking density is associated with reduced growth rates, poor feed conversion efficiency, compromised immune function, and heightened susceptibility to respiratory diseases. Additionally, overcrowding impairs welfare through limited mobility, increased incidence of leg disorders, feather pecking, and stress-related behaviors, while also exacerbating litter quality and ammonia buildup, further contributing to health risks. The study examines how these adverse effects cumulatively result in higher mortality rates and reduced productivity, underscoring the need for optimal stocking density management to ensure sustainable broiler production. The findings emphasize the importance of balancing economic considerations with animal welfare and health to promote both ethical and productive poultry farming practices.

Keywords: Broiler, health, performance, productivity, stocking density, welfare

INTRODUCTION

In modern broiler production systems, optimizing space utilization is a critical factor for economic success. The use of high stocking density, wherein a larger number of birds are housed within a limited area, has become a prevalent practice driven by the need to increase productivity and profitability [1–3]. However, while higher stocking density may maximize output in terms of bird numbers, it presents considerable challenges that can adversely affect the performance, health, and welfare of the chickens. As broiler genetics continue to improve, leading to faster growth rates and larger body sizes, the consequences of overcrowding become even more pronounced. High stocking density not only compromises individual bird well-being but also creates a range of environmental and management challenges [4–7].

One of the primary concerns associated with high stocking density is its detrimental effect on broiler performance. Reduced space per bird limits access to essential resources, such as feed and water, leading to increased competition and reduced feed intake for less dominant birds. This competition often results in poor growth uniformity within the flock, negatively affecting both the overall productivity and economic efficiency of the system. Moreover, crowding leads to increased heat stress, as birds are unable to effectively dissipate body heat, particularly in poorly ventilated housing. This stress further reduces feed intake and growth performance, ultimately impairing feed conversion efficiency. Thus, while high stocking density may

*Author for Correspondence

Md. Emran Hossain

E-mail: emran@cvasu.ac.bd

Professor, Department of Animal Science and Nutrition,
Chattogram Veterinary and Animal Sciences University,
Khulshi, Chattogram-4225, Bangladesh

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appear to offer short-term gains, the long-term effects on growth performance can significantly offset these benefits [8–11].

In addition to performance issues, high stocking density poses significant health risks for broilers. The limited space per bird creates an environment conducive to the rapid spread of pathogens, especially respiratory infections. Overcrowded conditions also lead to poor litter quality due to the high volume of fecal matter produced in a confined space. The accumulation of moisture and ammonia from decomposing litter increases the incidence of respiratory diseases, such as chronic bronchitis and ammonia burns, which compromise the birds' health and overall productivity. Moreover, immune suppression is common in birds raised under chronic stress caused by overcrowding, further exacerbating the risk of disease outbreaks and reduced vaccine efficacy [11–14].

Welfare concerns are equally pressing in high-density systems. Broiler chickens require adequate space to exhibit natural behaviors such as foraging, dust bathing, and wing stretching. In overcrowded conditions, these behaviors are severely restricted, leading to frustration and the development of abnormal behaviors such as feather pecking and cannibalism [11, 13, 15–17]. Additionally, restricted movement and poor litter conditions contribute to the development of leg disorders, footpad dermatitis, and hock burns, all of which cause pain and discomfort to the birds. Chronic stress in high-density flocks also leads to elevated corticosterone levels, which further impair welfare by suppressing the immune system and altering metabolic functions [6, 7, 12, 18–20].

The novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive examination of the multifaceted impacts of high stocking density on broiler chickens, integrating insights on performance, health, and welfare into a cohesive framework. While existing literature has primarily addressed these aspects in isolation, this study highlights the interconnections between overcrowding, physiological stress, behavioral restrictions, and overall productivity. By emphasizing the long-term implications of high stocking density not only for individual bird welfare but also for economic sustainability in poultry production, the research offers a unique perspective that can inform better management practices. Furthermore, it underscores the urgency of balancing productivity with ethical considerations, providing a basis for future investigations into innovative housing solutions and management strategies that promote both animal welfare and operational efficiency in the broiler industry.

DEMERITS OF EXCESS STOCKING DENSITY

Reduced Feed Access

In high stocking density environments, competition for feed becomes a significant issue among broiler chickens. When too many birds are confined within a limited space, the number of feeders becomes insufficient to accommodate all of them simultaneously. As a result, the more dominant or aggressive chickens often monopolize the feeding areas, while weaker or more submissive birds may struggle to access the feed. This unequal distribution of feed can lead to inadequate nutrient intake for a portion of the flock, ultimately reducing overall performance and growth rates. The birds that cannot access feed at optimal times may experience delayed growth, lower weight gain, and compromised health due to malnutrition. Furthermore, the stress caused by competing for feed can also exacerbate aggressive behaviors, further disrupting the feeding process. Over time, this continuous struggle for feed access may negatively impact flock uniformity, creating variability in body weights and potentially lowering the economic returns for producers [6, 12, 18, 21, 22].

Lowered Feed Intake

Stocking density directly affects the movement of broiler chickens, and restricted movement can significantly lower feed intake. In high-density environments, the limited space available per bird means they have less freedom to move around the pen, including access to feeding areas. This restriction discourages natural feeding behavior, as birds may become less motivated to compete for feed, especially when they must navigate through crowded conditions. In addition, the physical exhaustion caused by constantly maneuvering through a dense flock to access feeders can reduce the amount of

time birds spend eating. Over time, lowered feed intake leads to insufficient nutrient consumption, which stunts growth and impairs feed conversion efficiency. Furthermore, when birds cannot consume adequate feed, it compromises their immune systems, making them more vulnerable to infections and diseases. In severe cases, a prolonged lack of proper feed intake can result in emaciation, poor carcass quality, and significant economic losses for poultry producers [5, 7, 23–25].

Limited Water Access

Access to clean and sufficient water is essential for the growth, health, and welfare of broiler chickens. In high-density environments, similar to feed, competition for water sources becomes problematic. Birds need constant access to water to maintain hydration, aid in digestion, and support metabolic processes, especially during times of heat stress. When stocking density is high, overcrowding around water lines can occur, making it difficult for all birds to drink as often as they need [7, 14, 18, 26]. More dominant birds may block others from reaching the water sources, resulting in dehydration, which can cause severe health issues such as heat stress, impaired kidney function, and reduced growth. Dehydration also weakens the immune system, increasing susceptibility to diseases. Moreover, restricted access to water can affect feed intake, as broilers consume less feed when water is unavailable. This leads to a compounded effect on performance, as both nutrient and water deficits directly impair overall health and productivity.

Impaired Nutrient Absorption

In overcrowded conditions, broiler chickens often experience compromised nutrient absorption, which directly affects their growth and health. The stress of high stocking density disrupts normal gut function, impairing the digestion and assimilation of nutrients. Chronic stress elevates corticosterone levels, a hormone known to interfere with gastrointestinal health. This hormonal imbalance weakens the gut lining, reducing its capacity to absorb essential nutrients like proteins, vitamins, and minerals [9, 12, 21, 22]. Additionally, overcrowding fosters poor litter conditions, leading to higher ammonia levels, which can damage the gut epithelium and exacerbate digestive inefficiencies. Poor nutrient absorption not only reduces growth rates but also weakens immune responses, making chickens more susceptible to infections. The inability to absorb nutrients efficiently can cause deficiencies that further impair development, leading to a flock with uneven growth patterns and poor overall performance. As a result, feed is not utilized optimally, leading to higher production costs due to wasted nutrients and lower economic returns for producers [4, 27].

Impaired Feed Efficiency

Feed conversion efficiency (FCE) is a key performance metric in broiler production, representing the ability of birds to convert feed into body mass. High stocking density negatively impacts FCE by introducing several factors that disrupt normal feeding patterns and growth. Competition for feed and water, combined with limited space for movement, reduces feed intake, which subsequently affects how efficiently birds convert that feed into muscle. Additionally, stress, which is common in overcrowded environments, increases the production of corticosterone, a hormone that reduces nutrient absorption and shifts energy usage towards survival mechanisms rather than growth. Birds under stress also exhibit reduced activity levels, which further impairs their ability to digest and metabolize nutrients effectively. Poor air quality, common in high-density conditions, can also damage respiratory health, limiting oxygen intake necessary for metabolic processes [9, 12, 21, 22]. Altogether, these factors contribute to poor feed conversion efficiency, resulting in increased feed costs and reduced weight gain, ultimately lowering the profitability of broiler production.

Decreased Growth Rate

Broiler chickens grow rapidly, and achieving optimal growth rates is crucial for economic success in poultry production. However, when stocking density is too high, growth rates are negatively impacted due to a combination of factors. Firstly, competition for limited resources – like feed and water – leads to reduced intake, depriving chickens of the essential nutrients needed for growth. Additionally, the stress associated with overcrowding triggers physiological responses that reduce nutrient absorption

and direct energy towards coping with stress rather than building body mass [5, 9, 10, 24, 28]. Limited space for movement further exacerbates the problem by restricting physical activity, which is necessary for stimulating appetite and supporting muscle development. Furthermore, poor air quality in high-density environments, often due to ammonia buildup, can cause respiratory issues, reduce oxygen availability, and can impair metabolic processes. These combined stressors create an environment where chickens are unable to achieve their genetic potential for growth, leading to slower weight gain, poorer feed efficiency, and ultimately reduced overall productivity [4, 12, 22, 29, 30].

Poor Growth Uniformity

In broiler production, growth of uniformity is important for efficient processing and marketability. However, high stocking density often leads to poor growth uniformity, as competition for resources, like feed and water, disproportionately affects weaker or more submissive birds. In overcrowded environments, dominant birds may monopolize feeding areas, leaving less aggressive birds with limited access to nutrients [19, 31–33]. This unequal distribution of resources leads to variability in growth rates, with some birds growing significantly larger than others. Poor growth uniformity not only affects the welfare of underperforming birds but also complicates processing, as birds of different sizes may require different handling and processing times. Additionally, the presence of smaller birds in the flock can increase susceptibility to disease, as they are more likely to experience stress and malnutrition. Ultimately, poor growth uniformity reduces the efficiency of broiler production and lowers economic returns for producers, as non-uniform flocks are less valuable in the marketplace [6].

Increased Aggression

High stocking densities foster an environment where broiler chickens are more likely to exhibit aggressive behaviors. Overcrowding limits the physical space available for each bird, restricting their ability to move freely and increasing the frequency of social interactions, often in negative ways. As competition for limited resources, such as food, water, and rest areas increases, so does the likelihood of aggressive pecking and fighting. Aggression is also exacerbated by stress, which is more prevalent in densely stocked environments where birds are unable to exhibit their natural behaviors. This heightened aggression can lead to physical injuries, such as peck wounds, which may become infected and affect overall health. Moreover, constant fighting creates a hostile environment, leading to increased anxiety and stress within the flock, reducing overall welfare. These aggressive interactions, if left unchecked, can contribute to higher mortality rates and a reduction in productivity due to injuries, stress-induced weight loss, and compromised health [2, 11, 15].

Heat Stress Risks

High stocking density amplifies the risk of heat stress, especially in warm climates or poorly ventilated housing systems. Broiler chickens generate significant body heat, and when confined in crowded spaces, this heat cannot dissipate efficiently. The reduced airflow in overcrowded environments compounds the problem, making it difficult for chickens to regulate their body temperature. As a result, birds may suffer from hyperthermia, which can lead to severe health consequences such as dehydration, heat exhaustion, and even death. Heat stress also impacts performance by reducing feed intake and altering metabolic functions, as chickens divert energy towards cooling mechanisms rather than growth. Additionally, heat-stressed birds often exhibit increased panting, which can lead to respiratory alkalosis – a condition that disrupts blood pH levels and further impairs bodily functions. The cumulative effect of heat stress in high-density environments is a significant decline in productivity, higher mortality rates, and compromised welfare, all of which undermine the sustainability of broiler production [5, 7, 9, 10, 23, 34, 35].

Elevated Other Stress

Stress is a critical factor in determining the welfare and performance of broiler chickens, and stocking density plays a central role in stress levels within the flock. When chickens are housed at high densities, they are exposed to a variety of stressors, including limited space to perform natural behaviors, constant social competition, and increased interactions with other birds. These stressors can trigger the release

of corticosterone, a hormone associated with stress in birds [10, 15, 34, 35]. Prolonged elevation of corticosterone levels negatively impacts the immune system, reducing the birds' ability to fight off infections and diseases. Stress also suppresses appetite, leading to lower feed intake and, subsequently, slower growth rates. Furthermore, stress influences behavior, increasing anxiety, aggression, and feather pecking, which can result in physical injuries. Chronic stress can also affect reproductive health in breeder broilers, reducing fertility and egg production. Ultimately, the elevated stress levels caused by overcrowding reduce the overall health, welfare, and productivity of broiler chickens [2, 5, 6, 9, 22, 27].

Reduced Mobility

In high-density environments, the limited space available per bird severely restricts mobility, leading to several welfare and health issues. Broiler chickens are naturally active animals that need space to move, stretch, and perform basic behaviors like wing flapping and walking. However, in overcrowded conditions, birds are forced to remain sedentary for extended periods, which can lead to muscle atrophy and weakened skeletal development. Reduced mobility also increases the risk of developing leg disorders, such as tibial dyschondroplasia and lameness, as the birds' musculoskeletal systems are not adequately exercised. Furthermore, the inability to move freely limits access to feeders and drinkers, exacerbating competition for resources and further impairing growth. Immobility also contributes to poor litter conditions, as birds spend more time resting in one spot, increasing the likelihood of skin issues like footpad dermatitis and breast blisters. Overall, restricted mobility in high-density conditions leads to a decline in welfare, health, and performance [5, 7, 15, 23, 35].

Increased Leg Disorders

High stocking density significantly increases the occurrence of leg disorders in broiler chickens, which are already predisposed to skeletal problems due to their rapid growth rates. The limited space in overcrowded environments restricts movement, which prevents birds from adequately exercising their leg muscles and bones. This lack of physical activity can lead to weakened bones, cartilage abnormalities, and joint problems. Common leg disorders, such as tibial dyschondroplasia and valgus-varus deformities, become more prevalent, causing pain and reducing mobility. Additionally, heavier birds in high-density flocks are more likely to develop lameness, as their skeletal systems struggle to support their weight without sufficient space for movement. The inability to move freely exacerbates the problem, as birds cannot distribute their weight evenly across their legs. As a result, leg disorders not only reduce welfare but also hinder growth and feed efficiency, as lame birds eat and drink less, leading to economic losses due to poor performance and higher mortality rates [5, 16, 17].

Respiratory Diseases

The risk of respiratory diseases increases significantly in broiler chickens housed in high-density environments. Overcrowding leads to poor air quality, primarily due to the accumulation of dust, feathers, and ammonia produced from decomposing litter and feces. Ammonia, in particular, is a harmful gas that irritates the respiratory tract, leading to conditions such as bronchitis, tracheitis, and other upper respiratory infections. Prolonged exposure to high ammonia levels damages the birds' cilia, which are responsible for clearing debris and pathogens from the respiratory system. This damage compromises the birds' ability to fight off respiratory infections, making them more susceptible to diseases such as infectious bronchitis, avian influenza, and Newcastle disease. In addition, poor ventilation in overcrowded housing exacerbates the spread of airborne pathogens, increasing the likelihood of disease outbreaks. Respiratory diseases not only reduce the overall health and welfare of broilers but also impair their growth, leading to decreased performance and higher mortality rates [2, 5, 6, 7, 9].

Immune Suppression

High stocking density contributes to immune suppression in broiler chickens, making them more vulnerable to infections and diseases. Overcrowded environments cause chronic stress, which elevates corticosterone levels in the birds' bloodstream. Corticosterone, a stress hormone, has been shown to

impair the function of the immune system by reducing the activity of immune cells and weakening the birds' ability to mount an effective defense against pathogens. In addition to stress, the accumulation of waste and poor air quality in overcrowded environments further exposes birds to pathogens, exacerbating the risk of disease. The weakened immune system struggles to combat these infections, leading to more frequent and severe disease outbreaks within the flock. Immune suppression also compromises vaccine efficacy, as stressed birds may not respond adequately to vaccination programs. As a result, producers face increased health management costs and higher mortality rates, ultimately reducing the overall productivity and profitability of broiler operations [2, 11, 27].

Increased Mortality

One of the most critical impacts of high stocking density is the increased mortality rate among broiler chickens. Overcrowding creates an environment where birds are more prone to injuries, infections, and stress-related disorders, all of which contribute to higher mortality rates. Birds in densely packed spaces are more likely to experience physical injuries from aggressive pecking and trampling, particularly during feeding times when competition is intense. Additionally, poor air quality and the accumulation of harmful gases, such as ammonia exacerbate respiratory problems, leading to disease outbreaks that can result in mass mortality. Heat stress, which is common in overcrowded environments, also significantly raises the risk of sudden death, especially during warmer months or in inadequately ventilated housing. The cumulative effect of these stressors, coupled with immune suppression, means that mortality rates in high-density flocks are often much higher than in flocks housed at optimal stocking densities, leading to significant economic losses for producers [7, 18, 20, 21, 28, 36].

Poor Litter Conditions

In overcrowded environments, litter quality deteriorates rapidly due to the high volume of waste produced by the birds. As stocking density increases, more feces are deposited in the same area, leading to higher litter moisture levels. This excessive moisture creates ideal conditions for the proliferation of harmful bacteria and pathogens, such as *Escherichia coli* and *Clostridium perfringens*, which can cause diseases like necrotic enteritis. Poor litter conditions also contribute to the accumulation of ammonia, a byproduct of decomposing waste. Ammonia exposure irritates the respiratory systems of broiler chickens, increasing the risk of respiratory diseases. Additionally, wet litter can lead to skin issues, such as footpad dermatitis and hock burns, which cause discomfort and reduce mobility. Birds housed in poor litter conditions are also more prone to developing breast blisters, further compromising their welfare. Poor litter management in high-density settings results in reduced bird health, increased mortality, and lower productivity [5, 6, 7, 12, 26].

Feather Pecking Behavior

Feather pecking is a common behavioral issue in broiler chickens raised in high-density environments. Overcrowding limits the birds' ability to exhibit natural behaviors, such as foraging, dust bathing, and preening, leading to boredom and frustration. As a result, some birds may begin pecking at the feathers of their flock mates, causing damage and potentially leading to open wounds. Feather pecking can also be exacerbated by competition for resources, such as feed and water, as well as social stress from close confinement. This behavior not only reduces feather quality but also increases the risk of infections, as open wounds provide entry points for pathogens. In severe cases, feather pecking can escalate into cannibalism, further compromising welfare and increasing mortality rates. Feather loss also reduces the birds' ability to regulate their body temperature, making them more susceptible to cold stress. Managing stocking density and providing environmental enrichment can help mitigate feather pecking behavior [24, 32, 33, 37, 38].

Footpad Dermatitis

Footpad dermatitis is a painful condition that commonly affects broiler chickens housed in high-density environments, where poor litter quality and moisture levels are prevalent. The condition is characterized by inflammation and ulceration of the skin on the birds' footpads, caused by prolonged contact with wet, dirty litter. In overcrowded housing, litter tends to retain more moisture due to the

large volume of feces and limited space for birds to move around, leading to a breakdown of the skin barrier. Once the skin is compromised, the footpads become susceptible to bacterial infections, which can further worsen the condition. Footpad dermatitis not only causes pain and discomfort but also reduces the birds' ability to move freely, leading to decreased activity levels and impaired access to feed and water. This condition negatively impacts welfare, and severe cases can lead to carcass condemnation during processing, resulting in economic losses for producers [4, 5, 6, 7, 12, 17].

Ammonia Exposure

Ammonia exposure is a significant issue in broiler production, particularly in high-density environments where waste accumulation is greater. Ammonia, a byproduct of decomposing feces and urine, can reach harmful levels in poorly ventilated or overcrowded housing systems. Prolonged exposure to high ammonia concentrations irritates the respiratory tract of broiler chickens, leading to conditions such as conjunctivitis, tracheitis, and bronchitis. In severe cases, ammonia exposure can cause permanent damage to the respiratory system, reducing the birds' ability to breathe efficiently and increasing their susceptibility to respiratory infections. Additionally, high ammonia levels can cause eye irritation and blindness, further impairing the welfare of the flock. Ammonia exposure also negatively impacts growth and feed conversion efficiency, as the birds' overall health is compromised. Proper ventilation and litter management are critical to minimizing ammonia levels, but these measures are often difficult to maintain in high-density systems, exacerbating the problem [5, 12, 23, 37].

Reduced Welfare

Stocking density is a crucial determinant of animal welfare in broiler production, and high densities often lead to significant reductions in overall welfare. In overcrowded conditions, broiler chickens are unable to express natural behaviors, such as foraging, dust bathing, and wing flapping, which are essential for their physical and psychological well-being. The constant presence of other birds limits movement and increases stress, as chickens struggle to find personal space and compete for access to feed and water. The chronic stress experienced in high-density environments also leads to a higher incidence of injurious behaviors, such as feather pecking and cannibalism, further reducing welfare. Additionally, the accumulation of waste and poor air quality contributes to health issues such as respiratory diseases and footpad dermatitis, both of which cause discomfort and pain. Overall, the inability of chickens to perform natural behaviors, combined with poor health outcomes, results in a significant decline in welfare in overcrowded settings [4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 12].

CONCLUSION

High stocking density in broiler production may provide short-term economic benefits but poses significant long-term risks to performance, health, and welfare. Overcrowding impairs growth rates, reduces feed conversion efficiency, and leads to poor growth uniformity, ultimately compromising productivity. Health risks are exacerbated by increased respiratory diseases due to poor litter quality and high ammonia levels, resulting in higher mortality rates and increased susceptibility to infections. Additionally, high stocking density restricts natural behaviors and elevates stress levels, contributing to painful conditions such as leg disorders and footpad dermatitis. The findings underscore the necessity for a balanced approach that prioritizes both economic efficiency and the well-being of the birds. Maintaining appropriate stocking densities and implementing effective management practices are essential for achieving sustainable production outcomes.

Limitations

First, the research primarily focuses on the direct impacts of stocking density on performance, health, and welfare without extensively considering the influence of other management factors such as nutrition, housing design, and biosecurity measures. These variables can significantly affect the outcomes and may interact with stocking density in complex ways that warrant further investigation. Second, the data and findings presented are largely based on existing literature, which may introduce variability due to differences in experimental design, methodologies, and geographical contexts. Consequently, results from studies conducted in different regions or under varying management

practices may not be directly applicable to all broiler production systems. Third, the scope of this study does not encompass the long-term effects of high stocking density on poultry welfare and health over multiple production cycles. Longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate the cumulative impact of high density on the birds throughout their life stages. Finally, while this study emphasizes the importance of stocking density in broiler production, it may not adequately address the economic implications of adjusting stocking densities. Producers often operate under strict economic constraints, and further research is needed to explore cost-effective strategies for optimizing density while maintaining animal welfare and productivity.

Future Directions

First, longitudinal studies are essential to assess the long-term effects of varying stocking densities on the health, performance, and welfare of broilers. Such studies would provide insights into how chronic exposure to high density impacts growth patterns, disease resistance, and overall well-being over multiple production cycles. Second, investigations should explore the interactions between stocking density and other management factors such as nutrition, environmental conditions, and housing systems. Understanding how these variables work together will enable the development of more effective management strategies that promote both productivity and animal welfare.

Third, research should prioritize innovative housing designs and technologies that optimize space utilization while enhancing bird comfort and welfare. This may include advancements in ventilation systems, litter management, and environmental enrichment that help mitigate the negative impacts of high stocking density. Additionally, economic analyses should be conducted to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of implementing lower stocking densities. By identifying the economic benefits of improved animal welfare and health, producers may be more inclined to adopt practices that align with ethical considerations, and market demands for sustainably produced poultry.

Finally, consumer awareness and education should be a focal point, as understanding the implications of stocking density can drive demand for ethically produced products. Future research can help bridge the gap between scientific findings and consumer expectations, fostering a more informed dialogue about sustainable poultry production practices. Overall, a multidisciplinary approach involving collaboration among researchers, producers, and policymakers will be vital in addressing the challenges posed by high stocking density and promoting sustainable broiler production practices.

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