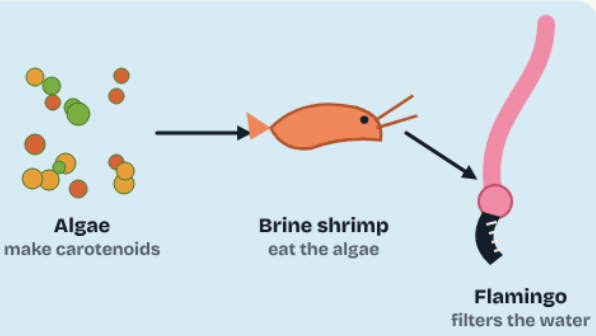
That is why

Why are flamingos pink?

They eat carotenoid pigments made by algae; the liver turns them pink and sends them to feathers, legs and beak.

A The food chain



Carotenoids: red, orange and yellow pigments

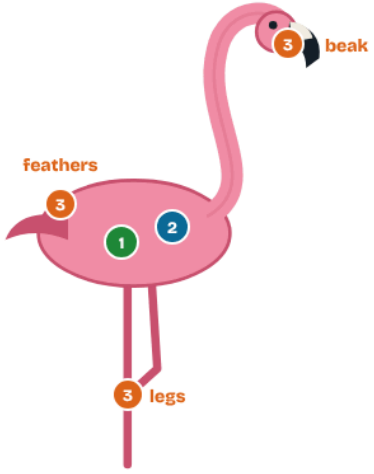
Shrimp can't make them; they pass them on. Comb-like plates in the bill trap algae, seeds, larvae and brine shrimp.

Shades vary by lake



The pigments must be eaten in very large amounts.

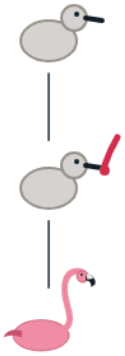
B Inside the bird



1. **Digestion** — enzymes break carotenoids down
2. **Liver** — fats absorb the pigments
3. **Delivery** — sent to feathers, skin, legs and beak

No pigment in the food, no pink in the bird.

C Color over a lifetime



Hatches white-gray
with a straight bill

Fed red crop milk
by both parents (throat cells)

Full color
after two or three years

Feeding parents fade to mostly white.

1 Courtship makeup

Greater flamingos rub color from the preen gland near the tail onto neck, breast and back, far more during group displays. It fades soon after breeding starts.

No coloring in, no pink out. Zoo flamingos eat a special diet containing canthaxanthin.

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