



# Introduction to Poultry Care

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Keeping backyard chickens can be a fun and rewarding experience for you and your family. With proper care, you can maintain productive egg-laying hens and a healthy flock. Observation is important in maintaining healthy birds.

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## Housing

A quality coop is essential for your backyard chickens. The coop must provide protection from the weather and predators. It should be well-ventilated and contain an insulated area with a light bulb or heat lamp for the winter months. Egg-laying hens will need nesting boxes; 1 box for every 4-5 birds. Chickens like to be up high and it is important you provide an area to roost.

Space-wise, you need a minimum of 3-5 square feet per bird, including the outdoor space. Chicks up to 2 weeks of age need at least 10 square inches of space per chick. By 4-8 weeks of age, they need at least 1 square foot. Crowding or flocks of 4-6 birds can cause stress and lead to cannibalism. Red-colored lights may decrease cannibalism in chicks, as it apparently makes them less enticing to peck.

Many people use pine shavings for chicks, then pine shavings, straw, or well-drained soil for adults. The coop floor may have dirt, wooden slats, concrete, or wire. There are a variety of products available.

Chicks initially need to be kept at 95 degrees F temperature, then decrease by 5 degrees weekly (usually by raising the heat lamp 3 inches weekly) until you reach room temperature. Observe the chick's behavior to determine the appropriate temperature. If they are huddled under the heat lamp, it is too cold.



If they choose to hang out along the periphery of the enclosure away from the central heat source, then it is too warm. When they are scattered about the enclosure with a central heat lamp, the temperature is just right. An adult chicken is most comfortable and efficient at producing eggs when the temperature is 70–75 degrees F. Chickens will reach dangerous levels of heat stress in temperatures over 95 degrees F.

A backyard chicken's main predators include raccoons, rats, owls, hawks, and cats. An enclosed space where they can retreat at night is essential for their protection. Ensure that the coop is free of small holes where predators can sneak in.

## **Diet**

Chickens are omnivores. They eat grains, fruits, and vegetables, as well as insects. Chickens should be fed a prepared feed that is balanced for vitamins, minerals, and protein. A laying hen diet should also include crushed oyster shells for egg production and digestion. A 6 lb. hen will eat roughly 3 lbs. of feed each week. Always purchase the best feed you can afford.

A chicken destined to become an egg-laying hen should be fed as follows: 0–6 weeks feed chick starter (18–20% protein); 6–14 weeks feed chick grower (16–18% protein), 14–20 weeks feed developer (14–16% protein), 20–24 weeks start layer ration (16–18% protein). Use chick starters that contain a coccidiostat. Some people advocate for adding scratch (dried cut-up corn) to the diet to prevent chicks from growing too fast and developing wing deformities.

Cracked corn and oats are a nice treat for adult chickens in moderation, but they will not supply all of their nutritional needs. Leafy green vegetables will provide enrichment as well.

Feed consumption may increase in the winter when chickens burn more calories and decrease in the heat of the summer.

## **Vaccination**

The only routine vaccine for chickens is for Marek's disease. This vaccine is given into the egg or on day one of age. There are no anti-parasitic medications approved for egg-laying hens. Many of the medications used in veterinary medicine are prohibited for use in poultry. We can provide information and advice on a case-by-case basis.

## **Egg Laying**

Chickens can live for 10–11 years. Hens begin laying at around 6 months of age and can continue for 5–10 years, with peak production occurring in the first 2 years. They will lay roughly 6 eggs each week. Egg production will drop each year when the hens molt (replace their

feathers in the early fall) and as daylight hours decrease. Hens need at least 12–14 hours of light each day to continue laying eggs. A regular light bulb is sufficient to supply this light.

## General Health

Healthy birds will be active and alert with bright eyes. They will be moving around, pecking, scratching, and dusting, except on hot days when they seek shade. Chickens that are healthy will talk and sing quietly throughout the day. Chickens raised in backyard settings generally stay healthy and are not easily susceptible to disease. The easiest way to find disease in chickens is to know what a healthy bird looks like.

As far as their egg-laying, and eating habits, each chicken is different. Monitor each chicken to get a feel for her normal production and consumption. Healthy droppings will be firm and grayish-brown, with white urine salts. Roughly every tenth dropping will be somewhat foamy, smellier than usual, and light brown.

When a chicken is not acting normal, for instance if she does not run to the food bowl, or she wheezes and sneezing, she may need medical care.

## Signs of Illness

Call us if you notice any of the following signs of disease:

- Discharge from the eyes/nares
- Sneezing/coughing
- Distended crop
- Distended abdomen
- Open-mouth breathing
- Pale comb and wattles

## Bird to Human Disease (Zoonosis)

There are diseases that chickens can transmit to humans. Salmonella is a bacteria that can cause severe illness and even death in people. The elderly, those under 5 years old, and immunosuppressed individuals are at the highest risk for a fatal infection. Good sanitary practices are of the utmost importance when handling your chicken, eggs, or cleaning up after chickens.

Additional contagious diseases include:

- Colibacillosis (*Escherichia coli*) from ingestion
- Erysipelas (*Erysipelothrix insidiosa*) from contact
- Tuberculosis (*Mycobacterium avium*) from ingestion, inhalation
- Chlamydiosis (*Chlamydophila psittaci*) from inhalation or aerosol