

CARING FOR BACKYARD CHICKENS

Chickens are wonderful, comical creatures that have been domesticated for thousands of years. While keeping backyard chickens was common 100 years ago, in the 1950s the advent of factory farming and inexpensive store bought eggs led to a decline in its popularity. Recently, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in keeping one's own chickens, both for the pleasure of fresh eggs and for the entertainment and companionship pet chickens provide.

All domesticated chickens belong to the same species, *Gallus gallus*. Within this species there are hundreds of different breeds. Different breeds of chickens have different temperaments, behaviors, hardiness, and egg-laying capabilities. All chickens, however, have the same basic requirements to stay healthy: a good quality diet, a clean environment, and protection from the elements and predators.

A healthy diet makes for happy chickens

Good nutrition is crucial to maintaining a healthy flock. All chickens should be fed a commercial crumble or pelleted diet formulated to meet their nutritional needs. They should get plenty of fresh feed daily and should be allowed to eat as much as they want.

Chicks

- It is important to feed a diet specifically made for baby chickens, called a chick starter/grower diet, until 20 weeks of age. Chick starters are higher in protein (20%) and fat (4%) than are feeds made for adult birds.

Laying hens

- Due to the large number of eggs they produce, laying hens have very high requirements for calcium, protein, and vitamins, and should be fed a laying diet. Layer diets are typically 16% protein and 3.5-5% calcium. Offer your laying hens a separate dish of crushed oyster shell as well to provide them with extra calcium.

Roosters and non-laying hens

- While a layer ration is critical to the health of laying hens, this diet is too high in calcium for roosters and for hens not laying eggs. These birds should be fed a maintenance diet. If you are unable to find a maintenance diet at your local feed store, an alternative is to dilute good quality layer ration with 20% scratch or fresh fruits and vegetables.

Choose your chickens' food carefully. Purchasing a nationally recognized brand is almost always a safe bet. If you buy food from a local feed mill make sure they have a good reputation, as small mills may not use strict quality control. Feed should be purchased in the original bag from the manufacturer and should include a tag that provides a guaranteed analysis of the nutrients within. Aim to purchase feed that specifies a mill date or expiration date to ensure that it is fresh. After opening a bag of feed, it should be consumed by your chickens within 3 months to ensure that the level of nutrients remains high and that the risk of spoilage is low.

Store your chickens' food in a clean, dry, rodent and insect-proof container. Insects and rodents carry bacteria and parasites that can make your bird ill. Keep this container in a cool area away from light, heat, and moisture. Excess heat can cause rapid

breakdown of vitamins in the food, and moisture can lead to the growth of toxic molds. It is best to keep the food stored indoors or in a garage to help prevent temperature extremes.

Many chickens love fresh produce such as corn, tomatoes, or leafy greens. Leafy greens such as lettuces, spinach, kale, and escarole make a nice supplement to a pelleted ration and can be offered regularly. Other vegetables can be offered as well but should not exceed 5% of the daily diet. Limit fruits, scratch, and dried meal worms to small amounts, as they are not nutritionally balanced foods. Do not feed your chickens highly salted foods, chocolate, avocado, alcohol, or caffeine, as these foods can make your bird ill.



One way to provide greens to your chickens is to allow them to "mow" your lawn for you. If your yard is such that you are able to let your chickens wander about safely, make sure not to use pesticides or herbicides in your garden. And be forewarned... you may need to protect your favorite flowers and vegetables from unwanted intrusions!

Access to clean, fresh water is very important for all chickens. Laying hens have particularly high requirements for water, and deprivation for only a few hours can cause a decline in egg production. Water consumption can increase dramatically on hot days, so check your chickens' water supply frequently. Make sure to offer fresh water from a well or faucet, as ground water can be contaminated with microbes. You can provide water for your chickens in poultry founts or sturdy bowls, or via an automatic watering system. Use heated bowls in the winter months if it becomes cold enough for the drinking water to freeze. And use caution with medications or supplements that are designed to be placed in the water; if chickens dislike the taste of these products, they may reduce their water consumption and become dehydrated.

Feed and water dishes should ideally be cleaned daily; if this is not possible, make sure to clean them at least once a week. All debris should be rinsed from both the inside and outside of the dishes before thoroughly scrubbing them with dish soap and rinsing them thoroughly. It is a good idea to disinfect the dishes and waterers on a monthly basis using dilute bleach (1 part bleach to 9 parts water) and then rinsing thoroughly with water; disinfection should be performed more often if there is a disease outbreak in the flock.

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A safe home for your chickens

The ideal henhouse is easily cleaned, provides shelter from the elements, and protects its occupants from predators and rodents. It should be roomy, well insulated, well ventilated, and dry. Locate your henhouse in an area with good drainage so that outdoor areas don't become muddy, or opt for a mobile henhouse that can be moved as needed. Allow a minimum of 8-10 square feet per bird. For flooring, concrete is easiest to clean, although wood covered with a waterproof barrier also works well. Cover the floor with 8" or more of pine or aspen shavings. Straw can be used as additional bedding or to line nest boxes, but do not use hay as it becomes moldy very easily. At least once a week, remove any soiled or moist litter, and replace with dry litter. If desired, dropping boards can be placed under perches and feeders. For laying hens, provide nest boxes in a quiet, dark area of the coop. Three to four hens can comfortably share one nest.

Chickens are ground-dwelling birds during the day but like to roost off of the ground at night. Provide sleeping perches at a comfortable height for your breeds of chickens. Make sure that perches are securely attached, not loose or swinging. Heavy-bodied chickens do better with wider and flatter perches than cylindrical dowels.

During the day, chickens need space to forage and engage in natural behaviors. They require full-spectrum natural sunlight for vitamin D and overall health, and should have an outdoor run or be allowed to range freely. They also need ready access to cool, shady areas to avoid overheating in hot weather. Chickens enjoy taking dust baths, and will do so when they have access to dry dirt. If your chickens are confined to a coop that does not have a dirt floor, provide them with a dish of mineral grit to aid their digestion, and with a sandbox for dust baths.

Predator-proofing the cage

Predators are attracted to chickens and will hurt or kill them if adequate protection is not provided. During the day chickens should be confined to a fenced yard or run where a secure 6-8' fence protects them from four-footed predators such as coyotes, foxes, dogs and cats. At night chickens should be placed into a secure coop to protect them from opossums, cats, and raccoons. Raccoons are especially dangerous, as they have dexterous hands that can reach through small openings. A single layer of chicken wire is not enough to protect your chickens from these predators. In areas of the coop where there are no solid walls, use durable ¾" wire mesh that is buried at least 6" underground. To foil predators that try to gain access to coops by digging underneath, install a wire flooring underneath your henhouse and coop.

Rats and mice carry and spread disease, and large rats can also attack your birds. Check your coop regularly for rodent tunnels or droppings. Keep the area around the coop clear of junk and weeds to discourage mice and rats from nesting. If rodents are present, they can be eliminated with traps or poison placed well away from your chickens and other pets.

Keep your chickens' environment toxin free

If your chickens have access to your yard or to an outdoor pen, make sure there are no toxins within their reach. Avoid using fertilizers, pesticides, or herbicides in the areas your chickens frequent. Remove any pieces of wire, screws, or other small

metal objects that your chickens could ingest. Antifreeze and petroleum products such as oil and gasoline are highly toxic and should not be used around any pets.

Scrambled, over easy, poached...

Many people enjoy their pet chickens not only for their companionship, but for their eggs as well. Most hens begin laying eggs at 5 to 7 months of age. A healthy hen can lay an egg every 1 to 4 days. Egg production peaks at 1-2 years of age, and then slowly declines as the hen ages. It is best to collect your chickens' eggs every day. If you have found an egg and are unsure whether it is fresh, place it in a bowl of water; fresh eggs sink, while older eggs float.

Hens do not need a rooster around in order to lay eggs. Eggs laid without the presence of a male, however, will not be fertile. If you are interested in producing chicks, you will need only one rooster for every 8 to 10 hens. Roosters are colorful and comical, and are an interesting addition to your flock. They are also noisy, however, so it's a good idea to check with your neighbors and city regulations before buying one. Having more than one rooster can result in territorial skirmishes, and warring parties may need to be separated to prevent bloodshed.

Hens need about 14 hours of day length to maintain egg production. Shorter days in the fall and winter will cause a decline or cessation in the number of eggs produced. Hens will also stop laying during their molting season, when they drop their old feathers and grow new ones. Most hens undergo their first molt at around 18 months of age. A normal molt lasts 2 to 4 months. While young birds molt yearly, older birds may molt more often or irregularly.

Chicken health and disease

It is important to observe your chickens every day. Frequent observation will help you get to know what is and is not normal for your chickens. At least once a week, pick up each bird and ruffle through its feathers. Does she feel abnormally thin? Is her crop distended? Do you see any parasites on his skin? Do her leg scales look rough and thickened? Has there been a change in behavior or appetite? Is she sneezing, or having trouble breathing? If you notice these or any other abnormal symptoms, isolate the sick bird and contact your veterinarian.

If you suffer a loss...

Often the best way to find out what ails your flock is to have a thorough necropsy performed when one of your chickens dies. A necropsy not only explains the cause of death, but detects viruses, bacteria, and parasites that can affect your whole flock. If you would like a necropsy performed, place your chicken in a clean plastic bag in a refrigerator and contact your veterinarian. Do not put your bird in the freezer, as this destroys important evidence. Some states have laboratories that provide necropsy services at a reduced fee for backyard poultry. Check with your veterinarian or state public health officials to find out what resources are available to you.



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