

# **Backyard Poultry Care**

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## **Housing**

**Coop:** A quality coop is essential to backyard chicken production. Layers need nest boxes . One per 4-5 birds. Coops must provide protection from the weather and predators. There should be a well-insulated area with a light bulb or heat lamp for the winter months as well as ventilation for fresh air. Chickens are descended from jungle birds, which means they like to be up high, so a place for them to roost is important.

**Space:** Be sure to have a minimum 3-5 square feet per bird, including outdoor space. Adult chickens need a minimum of about 2-3.5 square feet per chicken. Chicks up to 2 weeks of age need at least 10 square inches 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 lights sometimes decrease cannibalism in chicks since apparently it makes the red color of blood or hyperemic tissue less enticing to peck.

**Bedding:** Many people use pine shavings or for chicks, then pine shavings, straw, or well-drained soil when older. The flooring of coops can have dirt, wooden slats, concrete, or wire. A variety of products are available.

**Temperature:** Chicks initially need 95 degrees F, then decrease by 5 degrees F weekly (usually done by raising heat lamp 3 inches weekly) until reaching room temperature. An excellent method to determine if the chicks are at the proper temperature is to observe their behavior. If they are all huddled under the lamp then their environment is too cold. If they are all hanging out at the periphery of the enclosure away from a central heat lamp then their environment is too warm, and if they are scattered about an enclosure with a central heat lamp then the temperature is just right. An adult chicken is most comfortable and efficient at producing eggs when at 70-75 degrees F. Hot chickens eat less. Chickens may die of heat stress at temperatures over 95 degrees F.

**Predators:** Their main predators are raccoons, rats, owls, hawks, and cats. An enclosed space for them to stay at night is essential to their protection. Ensure that the coop is free of small holes for predators to sneak in.

## **Diet**

Chickens are omnivores. They eat grains, fruits, and vegetables as well as insects. Chickens should typically be fed a prepared feed that is balanced for vitamins, minerals, and protein. A healthy laying hen diet should also contain crushed oyster shell for egg production, and grit for digestion.

A 6-pound hen will eat roughly 3 pounds of feed each week. Always purchase the best feed you can afford.

They love fruit and vegetable scraps from the kitchen and garden, as well as bread.

Scratch-cracked corn and oats are a nice treat for the chickens that does not supply all their nutritional needs, but is fine in moderation.

Feed consumption may increase in the winter when burning more calories, and decrease in the heat of the summer. A critical part of a chicken's diet is continual access to clean, fresh water. This is especially true in the summer as they cool themselves by panting. The waterers should be constructed such that the birds cannot roost on them to defecate in the water. A chick that is destined to become a laying chicken should be fed the following as they age: 0-6 weeks of age feed chick starter (18-20% protein); 6-14 weeks of age feed chick grower (16-18% protein); 14-20 weeks of age feed developer (14-16% protein); 20-24 weeks of age start layer ration (16-18% protein). Some advocate adding some scratch (dried cut up corn) to the diet so they do not grow too fast and develop valgus limb or wing deformities. Scratch and fresh greens provide enrichment as well. Use chick starters rations containing a coccidiostat.

### **Health Care**

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 will find shade. Chickens that are healthy and active will also talk and sing quietly throughout the day.

As far as laying and eating habits, each chicken is different, so 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 is somewhat foamy, smellier than usual, and light brown.

Chickens raised in backyard settings generally stay healthy and are not easily susceptible to diseases. The easiest way to find disease in chickens is to know what a healthy bird looks like.

When a chicken isn't acting normal, for instance if she doesn't run to the food as usual or she wheezes or sneezes, start investigating.

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

## Egg Laying

Chickens can live for 10-11 years. Hens begin laying at around six 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 drops each year when the hens molt (replace their feathers in the early fall) and as daylight hours are lost. 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.

## **Bird to Human disease (Zoonosis)**

There are some 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 of age, and immunosuppressed individuals are most at risk for a fatal infection. Good sanitary practices are of the utmost importance when handling your chicken, eggs or cleaning up after your chickens.

Some contagious diseases are:

Colibacillosis ( *Escherichia coli*) ingestion

Erysipelas ( *Erysipelothrix insidiosa*).contact

Tuberculosis ( *Mycobacterium avium*).ingestion, inhalation

Salmonellosis ( *Salmonella pullorum*).ingestion

Chlamydiosis ( *Chlamydia psittaci*).inhalation, aerosol

A Quick Reference Guide to Unique Pet Species, January 2011, Cathy Johnson-Delaney , Steven Benschmidt

Websites and books with information on backyard or production poultry

1. Backyardpoultrymag.com

2. Backyardchickens.com

3. CDC's information sheet on Salmonella,  
<http://www.cdc.gov/features/salmonellapoultry/>

4. University of Florida Extension, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/an239>

4. University of Minnesota Extension,

<http://www1.extension.umn.edu/food/smallfarms/livestock/poultry/backyard-chicken-basics/>

6. University of Connecticut Extension,

<http://web.uconn.edu/poultry/poultrypages/diseasefactsheet.html>

7. Cooperative extension system, <http://www.extension.org/poultry>

8. Purdue Extension , <http://ag.ansc.purdue.edu/poultry/extension.htm>

9. North Carolina State University Extension,

[http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/poulsci/tech\\_manuals/small\\_flock\\_resources.html](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/poulsci/tech_manuals/small_flock_resources.html)

#### References:

1. Greenacre, Cheryl: Basic Care of Backyard Poultry, AVMA Proceedings 2014

2. Greenacre, Cheryl: Common Diseases of Backyard Poultry, AVMA Proceedings 2014

3. Johnson-Delaney, Cathy; Benschmidt, Steven: A Quick Reference Guide to Unique Pet Species, January

2011,

4. University of Minnesota Extension

<http://www.extension.umn.edu/food/small-farms/livestock/poultry/backyard-chickenbasics/>