

Basic Chicken Care

GENERAL INFORMATION

Lifespan

- Chickens can live as long as a dog or cat--- up to 14 years or longer.
- Egg laying for a hen generally starts at 6 months old, peaks at 18 months and declines with age.

Cost

- Start Up costs for coop, maintenance, tools, cleaning, equipment, heating / cooling appliances, dishes, nets, food storage, scale, fencing, security locks, lighting,
- Supplies per bird for food, bedding, nutritional supplements, cleaning supplies
- Vet care if your hen becomes ill. Consider exam fee, possible diagnostics, medications costs and other costs related to illness or injury.

Time

- 1 hour per day minimum for cleaning, parasite control, grooming, physical exam, travel time to purchase supplies, construction, repair, medication, feeding, supervise free time out of pen.
- Hens should be cared for twice daily. During the am to ensure food, water, and cleaning for the day and again in the evening to ensure adequate supplies for the evening and that all birds are securely confined overnight.
- Think ahead for vacations and weekends away. Do you have someone is able to care for your birds while you are away and knows about your flock and chicken health in case something goes wrong?

Location

- Coop and pen should be located in an area that provides shade, direct sunlight, good drainage and protection from prevailing winds and will not present a problem to neighbors.

Uninvited guests

- Chickens will attract bird mites and lice, mice, yard birds, squirrels, raccoons, dogs, coyotes, rats, and humans. You must ensure that your flock is safe both from predators and pests.

Companionship

- A single chicken is a sad chicken. Plan to have at least 2--- they are flock animals and need the companionship of other chickens. Generally, 3---4 compatible chickens can be well maintained in a typical city environment. Individual bird's age and temperament can affect compatibility. Over crowding chickens is the most common mistake. Sometimes single birds can thrive with a human friend if they have special needs.

Handling and Restraint

- Never handle a chicken by wings, feet or legs. Herd bird to corner using slow deliberate movement. Fast= predator, slow = less threat. Place hands over top part of wings

(shoulders) and hold securely but do not squeeze. Pick up and hold under arm to keep wings in place. Support feet with other hand if bird will tolerate. To restrain for transport or examination, drape a towel over shoulders cape style and wrap around body.

Transportation

- Consider travel time and avoid extreme weather conditions when bringing home new hens. Heat exhaustion can develop quickly; interior car temps can reach a fatal point in 10 minutes. Medium sized hard pet carriers work well for security, safety and stress. Line with a towel, shredded paper or straw. Food is a good stress reducer. Offer wet food like greens or cucumber for long trips.

Bringing Hen Home

- If other birds are already present a 2 week quarantine in a separate area is recommended to watch for signs of illness and parasites. Avoid noisy, high traffic areas and allow the bird to acclimate before introducing to other birds, animals and family.
- The majority of their waking hours are spent active, grazing, foraging for food - plants, bugs and occasionally small rodents.
- The hens spend their days scratching for food, dust bathing, preening, playing and napping. Hens begin to lay eggs at about 6 months of age. Domesticated hens have been bred to lay one egg a day but by 18 month of age, egg laying frequency generally diminishes and many adult or senior hens stop laying altogether.
- Chickens are sociable, cheerful and intelligent creatures that can form lifelong bonds with each other and other species. Because of their keen intelligence and instinctive physical activity, they need a stimulating environment that mimics as much as possible the rich and diverse world nature designed them to enjoy.

COOP

Placement

- The coop needs to be a closed structure which provides shelter from cold, heat, wind, rain, snow and predators for protected roosting, nesting, feeding and watering space.

Construction & Materials

- Coops can be purchased ready made or in kits, constructed within an existing structure or built from scratch.
- NOTE: rabbit hutches, plastic igloos, dog houses and such are not appropriate structures.

Floor

- The floor should not collect and hold moisture, be easy to clean, retain heat in cold weather and exclude rodents/predators. A dirt floor draws heat away and is not easy to clean or rodents/predators proof. A wood floor is adequate provided it is at least a foot off the ground, insulated and sealed properly but is difficult to sanitize because it is porous. A concrete floor is ideal since it discourages rodents/predators and is easy to sanitize. Regardless of the floor type, bedding strewn on the surface is needed to absorb moist fecal matter and facilitate cleaning. Leaves or wood shavings work best and can be composted or easily bagged and disposed of as solid waste.

Walls

- Materials that are resistant to moisture and mold and easily cleaned are best. Chemically treated materials should be nontoxic. A good compound with anti fungal agents is good for humid areas. Clear varnish is also good. Everything should be treated or painted before it is assembled. Wooden structures should be draft free.

Roof

- The coop roof should be made of a material that will not collect and hold heat. The roof surface should be covered with an insulating tar paper to protect from heavy rains. The roof should be slightly inclined, to allow water to run off and if it overhangs it will protect from downpours. A few small openings along the eaves allow moisture to escape and provide fresh air.

Doors

- Doors for chickens should be just large enough for the largest bird and can be positioned anywhere from ground level to about 2 feet high with a stable ramp with cleats. Chickens are ground dwellers, not parrots---small doors at heights greater than 3 feet with flimsy, unstable ladders are not appropriate. Doors must be able to be secured against predators at night.
- Do not forget to provide easy human access to the coop so you can collect eggs and clean the entire coop.

Windows

- You may consider windows as chickens love windows and need natural light. Cover with 1/2" metal screen so they can be opened for ventilation in hot weather.

Roosts

- Lumber or branches can be used. They should be strong enough and mounted securely enough to hold all birds. The surface should be rough for good grip with no splinters or sharp edges. For medium sized birds, 2" or 4" flat or 1 1/2" diameter is best for foot comfort. The longer roost the better to prevent competition. They should be set 18" from wall, 2 ---3 feet off the floor. If mounted higher, rung steps are needed spaced 8--12 inches apart. The addition of a dropping board underneath and elevated roost will collect droppings and keep floor space below clean and inhabitable.

Climate

- If you provide heat for your hens you may consider only providing a heat lamp. If hens are kept dry and the coop does not have drafts your birds will not need much heat. Use caution when considering what to put in your coop as heaters and lamps can cause fire hazards. Your coop can have a lot of dust and combustible materials, from feathers, to feed, to straw. Your best protection is to build a coop and outdoor enclosure to keep your birds dry and free from drafts.
- On hot summer days you will need to think about keeping your coop and birds cool. You can do this by building your coop in a shaded area and keeping the surrounding area cool on hot days. You can do this by spraying down the coop, not the birds. You may consider providing a fan on very hot days if there is little or no air movement.
- Chickens can tolerate quite a bit of cold weather. You will need to ensure that their drinking water does not freeze and that their coop is not drafty or damp.

Ventilation

- Doors, windows and vents near the ceiling supply oxygen, remove heat from breathing, remove moisture from breath and droppings, harmful gasses and dust particles, and dilute disease causing airborne organisms.

Light

- Natural light from windows and/or skylights should be provided. The minimum light intensity you should provide should be enough to clearly see the hens feed when standing over the feeder.

Feeders

- Food receptacles should be made of non-corrosive material that is easily cleaned minimizes spillage, prevents contamination with droppings and keeps food dry. The containers should be large enough for all the birds to comfortably eat at once or numerous enough to prevent competition or intimidation.

Waterers

- Water receptacles should be made of non-corrosive material that can be cleaned and disinfected with a solution of chlorine bleach, prevent contamination with droppings and is spill and leak proof. The containers should be large enough for all the birds to comfortably drink at once and hold enough water for all birds for an entire day. They should be slightly positioned higher than the feeder or far enough away to prevent contamination with food.

Nest boxes

- One nest box for every 2 -3 hens. Chickens prefer wooden nest boxes with covered opening for privacy placed on or as low to the floor as possible. If set higher they require a perch in front of the opening. They should be filled with 2 -4 inches of straw, litter or grass.

PEN

General

- The fenced area surrounding the coop that provides secure access to exercise, sunlight, earth and vegetation and is freely available to the birds when they are unsupervised during the day. It is constructed to prevent the bird's escape and prevents entry by intruders/predators.
- If the coop is elevated 2 feet so the chickens can use the space underneath, the coop and pen should not occupy the exact same footprint. Do not forget to provide adequate opening and space for a person to be able to clean the entire outdoor pen area and to be able to catch hens if needed.

Pen Floor

- Choose a well drained area. Material for the floor should be clean, non-toxic, biodegradable, readily available, inexpensive and replaceable. Since it will become compacted from little feet and contaminated by concentrated droppings and parasites, it will need to be raked out and replaced frequently to reduce odor and fly activity. Play sand, leaves, municipal wood chips, sod and hard wearing ground cover work well.

Fencing

- The type of fencing depends on what the most likely predators are in your area. Dogs, rats, raccoons, and coyotes are the most prevalent in city neighborhoods. It's best to build the strongest deterrents possible. Chain link panels or welded or woven fencing on a sturdy frame reinforced at the bottom with small mesh metal wire that prevents predators from tunneling under the fence will discourage most intruders. Regular inspection is key to security.

Cover

- The outdoor pen should be covered to keep hens in and predators out. Covering the pen with a roof such as corrugated fiberglass can provide shade and rain shelter.

Windbreak

- Providing a wind and rain/snow break will give the birds a protected area to be outdoors even in winter.

Shade

- Shade must be available and can be provided by vegetation or strategically placed materials.

Dust bath

- Taking a dust bath is the closest thing to heaven for a chicken. They bathe in the sun and in loose dry soil depressions in the dirt which cleans their feathers and rids them of parasites. Birds will usually dig their own hole for dust baths. If they are unable to dig their own dirt bath area you will need to provide one. Keep the soil in the dust bath loose and add play sand if it is a heavy clay soil. Adding a little poultry dust, diatomaceous earth or wood ash increases the effectiveness of parasite control. Large heavy rubber feed buckets filled with play sand are a welcome addition to the indoor coop in the winter.

Enrichment furnishings

- Lots of large branches, stumps or platforms provide places to go and things to do and look natural and attractive in the pen. You can include bushes, boxes or other objects to sit in or hide behind. You can plant kale or other safe, edible vegetation around the outside of the pen for forage. Overcrowding, boredom and barren pens are the most common cause of behavior problems.

Nontoxic plants

- Chickens are inquisitive and voracious eaters of vegetation and many ornamental garden plants can be toxic to them. Learn which of your plants might be harmful and be sure your hens cannot reach them through the fencing.

PROVIDING GOOD CARE FOOD/WATER

General

- Fresh food and water are required daily and should be available at all times of day and night. Hay, grain and prepared feed should be fresh, less than one year old and free of mold, insects or other contaminants.
- Caution toxic: onion, avocados, chocolate, among other items
- Supplements: oyster shell or limestone
- For calcium, granite grit for digestion, mineral salt or ground salt licks. Chickens drink 1 - 2 cups of water a day. Feed should be stored in rodent proof containers in a cool dry area inaccessible to animals. Food that is uneaten or spilled should be removed from animal enclosures daily.

Social Needs

- Temperament and social structures of animals should be taken into account, and separate areas provided for incompatible birds.

Vet Care

- Locate a veterinary clinic nearby that will see chickens before one is needed. Preferably one that specializes in avian care. Chickens are welcome in increasing numbers of city clinics.

SANITATION

- Manure and wet bedding should be removed from coop and animal feeding and lounging areas daily. Thorough, complete cleaning of walls and perches, removal of all bedding and disinfecting of coop and furnishings should be done at least once a year. If your birds have been diagnosed with an illness you will want to clean your entire coop and outdoor area before getting any new hens. Keeping shelter areas clean and dry will help prevent bacteria, fungi, insects, rodents, etc. Rodent levels will be minimized by keeping all feed in rodent proof containers and removing spilled or uneaten food promptly. Litter can be double bagged and disposed of as solid waste or composted but must be done in an area where chickens will not scratch for at least a year. Housing animals in spacious, clean and relatively dust free environments will keep them healthy and will minimize human exposure to infectious disease.