

CARING FOR YOUR CHICKEN – TOP TIPS

HOUSING AND ENVIRONMENT

Chickens are a popular urban pet and there are many choices for housing them. The ultimate decision on what type of housing you choose will be dictated by size of flock, space available, cost, disease control and predator proofing among other things.

Different life stages

Young chicks and battery hens will need to be kept in weather proof indoor accommodation and provided with additional heat sources initially. Chicks can be placed in weather proof runs by 6 -8 weeks of age so long as the weather is not too cold. Prior to 6 weeks they should be housed indoors in a brooder set up with artificial heating and lighting. Ex -battery hens may also need a little more TLC initially. The environment they have come from can lead to substantial feather loss and the completely artificial lighting they have been exposed to means their normal moulting cycle will be disrupted. Most chickens moult once yearly in late summer but ex battery chickens can moult at strange times of the year until they adjust to natural weather and light patterns.

Substrate

The material on the ground is an important consideration. Ideally avoiding muddy wet environments is best however chickens do tend to destroy grass quite rapidly. The two ways to combat this are to have a movable chicken run to periodically 'rest' part of the yard. This has the added advantage of disease and parasite control. The other way to preserve grass is to put down a wire mesh before planting the grass. This protects the roots from damage. Other substrates can be considered, especially those that drain well. Avoid bark chips as they promote exposure to mould which can be toxic.

Ventilation

The house itself needs to be weather proof and draught free but well ventilated. Ventilation holes should be situated high up to reduce draughts. A build up of droppings in the environment leads to ammonia fumes which can damage the respiratory tract. Good ventilation reduces the risk of respiratory tract diseases.

Exits and entrances

The doorways need to be large enough so that several chickens can enter and exit at once otherwise the dominant hens will block the more subordinate hens from moving in and out.

Vermin Proof

Contact with wild birds should be minimised as they will eat the food and can carry diseases such as paramyxovirus and avian influenza. Predators such as dogs and foxes can be kept out with sturdy wire that extends 3 feet along the ground at the bottom (no need to hide it under the earth as it will prevent digging if on the surface). An overhang of wire at the top stops jumping over the wire. Rats and mice should be discouraged with vermin proof feeders such as spiral feeders or treadle feeders and by collecting eggs soon after lay.

Perches and nest boxes

Should be low enough to the ground to prevent bruising of the feet when they jump off and there should be sufficient perch space to prevent competition. Allow around 25cm per bird (less if bantams). A nest box per 3 birds is acceptable.

Dust baths

Should be available to encourage preening and feather quality. The use of diatomaceous earth (DM) added to the dust bath will prevent mites and lice from infesting the birds.

Cleaning

The surfaces of the coop should be easily cleaned to reduce parasite burdens and disease risk. For small flocks plastic moulded coops are an attractive, easily cleaned option with considerably less risk of red poultry mite which can be difficult to control infestations in wood or wire constructions.

FEEDING

Chick crumb or starter feed is designed for chicks from day 1 to 6 weeks of age. It has a higher protein content than other feeds which is essential for growth. It should not be fed past 6 weeks as at this point high protein levels are unnecessary and can lead to health problems.

Growers Pellets are designed for older chicks. It has a slightly lower protein content and lower calcium which is not needed in high levels again until they start to lay. This can be fed from 6 to 20 weeks of age

Layers Pellets as the name suggests are for hens that are laying which usually occurs from 20 + weeks of age. This ration has similar protein levels to grower pellets but calcium content is higher to allow for the requirements of egg production.

Grain or scratch. There are various grains and grain mixtures fed to chickens. These are fine to offer in small quantities as an occasional treat but are not a balanced diet and can cause problems if fed to excess. Wheat is the preferred grain for chickens being easily digested and they do love it but should only be fed occasionally.

Grit. Because birds do not have teeth the grinding of their food takes place in their muscular stomach (Gizzard). Birds will ingest small stones for this purpose, but it is beneficial to provide them with a mixture of digestible and indigestible grit to help this process. The indigestible grit aids grinding of food and the digestible grit is a very important source of calcium for laying hens. Grit should always be provided in a separate bowl and chickens will moderate their own intake.

Kitchen scraps. Chickens are classed as production animals and it is therefore against the law to feed kitchen scraps. Vegetables and fruit can be offered for enrichment but must be fed directly from the allotment or shop, not allowed to pass through a kitchen.

DISEASES

Chickens, like other birds, have evolved to hide signs of illness for as long as possible. Birds who look ill will attract predators which is a danger to the flock and so healthy flock members will attack or ostracise an ill looking bird for the safety of the entire group. Spotting an ill looking bird can therefore be difficult in the early stages, so regular handling and monitoring to assess behaviour, body condition, food intake and weight is vital. The following can be signs of a problem:

- Nasal discharge
- Lethargy/unwillingness to move
- Weight loss or loss of body condition
- Dull feathers or loss of feathers
- Isolation from flock/bullying
- Abnormal smell
- Dirty vent
- Fluffed up feathers
- Comb colour change

The following are some common problems seen in backyard poultry:

Internal parasites

Worms are very common and can lead to death and other diseases. Even a light worm burden can build up rapidly in the environment. A regular worming strategy as part of routine flock management is vital. We recommend twice yearly worming with flubenvet as a minimum. More intensive worming may be required in other circumstances. Flubenvet may be used without an egg withdrawal provided it is below 30 ppm, but at this dose it does not treat tapeworm. A faecal sample can be tested at the clinic to check for tapeworm if this is of concern.

Feather pecking

Can be focused at a sick chicken so examine the victim carefully and seek veterinary advice early on. Also caused by overheating, feeding too much corn and overcrowding. Correct the underlying cause and consider removing the chicken(s) responsible until resolved. Feather pecking can progress to cannibalism.

Bumblefoot

Swelling of the pad of the foot as a result of a bacterial infection. Can be as a result of perches being too high from the ground leading to bruising. Lameness in one leg can lead to bumblefoot in the other due to excessive weight being focused on only one leg.

Egg peritonitis

Very common especially in ex-battery hens. Signs are general ill health, weight loss, inactivity, swollen abdomen, caused by malfunction of the reproductive tract leading to inflammation in the abdomen. Early intervention is key to good outcome. Often not curable but can be managed.

Respiratory disease

Common, various causes such as fugal, bacterial and viral. Early intervention gives better outcome. Poor diet, poor ventilation and stress exacerbate the condition.

Lice

The chicken louse (*Menopon gallinae*) is very easy to see with the naked eye. It is about 2mm long and pale yellow. They move rapidly away from the light when the feathers are parted. Their eggs look like granules of sugar at feather bases. They will depress birds and are worse in Autumn and winter. Treatment includes diatomaceous earth (DM, Biolink) or a pyrethrum-based louse powder.

Red mite (*Dermanyssus gallinae*)

These mites are hard to spot because they are only on the chickens during the night and live in crevices in the coop during the day. They suck blood causing anaemia and lethargy and can be very difficult to get rid of. They can live for almost a year without feeding. Treatment is difficult and revolves around the use of a spray treatment for the chicken coop eg. Indorex or acclaim as well as the use of diatomaceous earth (DM, Biolite) spread liberally in the environment and dusted into the dust baths for the chickens all year round. Wild birds can re infest the flock and eradicating mites from every nook and crevice can be extremely difficult. A new product called Exzolt can be added to drinking water, has no egg withdrawal and lasts for 3 months but is very expensive.

RECORD KEEPING

Regardless of whether you are a commercial poultry producer or keep chickens as pets, it is a legal requirement to keep a record of any medications they receive. The record should contain the bird(s) identification, breed or species, age, drug, batch number, dose, route of administration, date and withdrawal time for eggs or meat. If a drug is used via the Cascade, then statutory withdrawal times are not less than 7 days for eggs and 28 days for meat.