

CHICKEN CARE SHEET

Chicken Housing

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 rescue (ex-commercial) 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. Rescue hens may also need a little more care initially. The environment they have come from can lead to substantial feather loss and the 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-commercial hens 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. Refer to current avian influenza guidelines for latest advice on compulsory housing: www.gov.uk/guidance/avian-influenza-bird-flu-cases-and-disease-control-zones-in-england

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 help 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 in wood 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. Note that feeding dried mealworms is also not permitted.

Spotting signs of illness

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 ostracize 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
- Enlarged abdomen (coelom)
- Dull feathers or loss of feathers
- Isolation from flock/bullying
- Abnormal smell
- Dirty vent
- Fluffed up feathers
- Comb colour change

If you have any concerns about your chicken's health, please contact the hospital to make an appointment with a member of our Exotics team.

Record keeping

All backyard flocks, regardless of size, must now be registered with APHA. More detail can be found by following this link: www.gov.uk/guidance/register-as-a-keeper-of-less-than-50-poultry-or-other-captive-birds. Regardless of whether you are a commercial poultry producer or keep chickens as pets, it is also 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 Prescribing Cascade, then statutory withdrawal times are not less than 14 days for eggs and 28 days for meat.