

Backyard Chicken Care

Backyard chickens make excellent pets. They are social and curious, and it is a lot of fun observing them forage in the yard. Before acquiring chickens, please check with your local council about restrictions and requirements for owning backyard chickens. Source your chickens from a hen rescue or a reputable breeder. Acquire information about vaccination status, parasite prevention received and current diet.

Housing

- A **minimum** floor space required is 3m² for 3 birds, and additional 0.4m² for each additional bird, however more is better.
- A chicken coop provides a place for chickens to sleep, lay eggs, shelter from harsh weather and protection from predators. A coop should be easy to clean and provide adequate ventilation. A coop can be permanent or portable/moveable.
- A run attached to the coop or access to the backyard during the day should be provided. A run, if used, should be rotated around the yard.
- A coop should be **predator and pest proof**. Predator attacks (dogs, foxes, cats) are very common in backyard chickens. Chickens should be locked up in the coop at night to protect from predators.
- Nest boxes should be placed on the cool end of the coop.
- Wooden roosting perches should be provided off the ground. There should be enough roost space available for all the chickens.
- Many options are available for litter and bedding, such as straw and shredded newspaper. Hay and regular wood shavings can cause respiratory problems. Dust reduced shavings can also be used.
- Poor hygiene, commonly from accumulation of droppings, feathers and old food, can cause illness in chickens. The coop, perches, nest boxes and bowls should be cleaned regularly, including scraping away any organic material. Wet and soiled litter needs to be removed and replaced.
- Opportunities to express normal behaviours is essential for physical and mental health. Access to sunshine, scratching, flapping, running and dust bathing opportunities should be available.

Diet

- Dietary requirements vary depending on the age of your chickens and egg laying status. Information provided here applies to chickens beyond 18 weeks of age.
- From 18 weeks of age, a layer diet should be fed. The basis of a layer diet should be a good quality commercial layer feed in the form of pellets or crumble, containing ~ **15-18% protein** and ~ **4% calcium**. This can be supplemented with vegetable scraps, and small amounts of scratch mix or mash. Egg shells and shell grit can also be offered for an additional calcium source. Any uneaten eggs can be fed back to the chickens.
- Chickens should be allowed to forage and scratch in the yard for insects and garden plants.
- Food and fresh water, changed at least daily, must be always available to all the chickens.
- Food and water bowls should be cleaned out regularly to prevent mould and bacterial build up.

Health care

- Newly acquired chickens should be examined by a vet. Annual check-ups are recommended thereafter.
- Discuss with your vet the requirements for parasite control and hormonal implants.
- If eggs laid by your chickens are consumed by people, discuss with your vet withdrawal times for any medications used and indications for lead (heavy metal) testing.