

Caring for Chickens in Winter

by Dalia Monterroso, AKA The President of Chickenlandia

The days are getting shorter and the nights much colder. Everywhere, new chicken keepers are starting to feel concerned about their flocks. Will their feathered friends be okay in lower temperatures? Does there need to be a heat lamp in the coop? Surely chickens can't withstand several days or weeks of [snow](#)? It's just so *cold* out there!



With my role as a Backyard Chicken Educator, I hear these concerns every year from new chicken keepers. Of course, these are valid concerns, especially from those who live in climates with extreme or wildly fluctuating weather. My goal has always been to calm people's fears and give them confidence in their choices. Though it may seem like there's only one way to care for chickens during the winter months, I find it's better to talk about varying situations and allow people to make informed choices according to their own unique situations.

Do Chickens Need Supplemental Heat in Winter?

This is a heated topic within the chicken community (pun intended), but as with most things the answer is not as simple as it seems. Depending on breed, healthy, adult chickens generally do not need supplemental heat. Most laying chickens sold in farm stores or from hatcheries can handle cold temperatures just fine. If you question this, consider that there are chickens living in Minnesota, Alaska, and even Siberia with no supplemental heat!



Contrary to what you might think, it's actually moisture that is the problem in the winter, not the cold. This is why I recommend making sure you have good ventilation in your coop, while ensuring it isn't drafty where your flock roosts at night. It's natural to think that you must seal every nook and cranny and close every window to seal in the heat. But that's actually a recipe for disaster! Let me explain.

When they sleep, chickens generate moisture from their breath. Their droppings also contain moisture. If you have their water container in the coop that will release moisture. And if you have ducks living in the coop with them, well, you get where I'm going. Good airflow in the coop will create a dryer environment, staving off things like ammonia buildup, respiratory issues, and even frostbite. You can learn more about the importance of chicken coop ventilation by watching [this video](#).

With good ventilation and no drafts where your chickens roost, it's very unlikely that supplemental heat will be needed even when the temperatures get below freezing. Remember, chickens are wearing thick down coats and cuddle up together at night to

keep each other warm. However, if you feel like you're doing all the right things and you're still running into problems, if you have [very old chickens](#) or [young chicks](#), or if you have breeds that aren't cold hardy, you might have to consider a safer heating option for your coop. In these scenarios, I recommend a radiant-type heater like the [Cozy Coop](#) or the [Sweeter Heater](#). These panel heaters are made especially for use in a chicken coop and are far less of a fire hazard than a heat lamp. I can't, in good conscience, recommend the use of heat lamps in chicken coops. They are cheaply made, get very hot, can develop dust and catch fire, and can even spontaneously explode!

When I experienced my first winter with chickens, it was kind of a shock how quickly their water would freeze. I found myself hauling heavy water buckets from the kitchen sink to the chicken yard several times a day. As you can imagine, I was not excited about this chore! My life became so much easier once I invested in a heated waterer made especially for my flock. I even have some heated dog bowls that I use for the ducks and to keep fermented feed from freezing. I know it's an extra expense, but in my opinion, adding a heated waterer to your list of winter supplies is a lifesaver.

I will never fault a new chicken keeper that's worried about the welfare of their chickens during the cold months. In my opinion, that's a sign of good chicken parenting. But rest assured, your flock is likely going to be just fine, even if you need a few extra layers over your pajamas when you're doing your chicken chores!



During a cold snap, one thing you can do to put your mind at ease is give your flock a nice warming treat before bedtime (make sure they eat all of it or you'll be tempting rodents to come around after nightfall). I love the [Blue Corn Fixins](#) from Little Farmer

Products® for this purpose, and I even made some yummy homemade "suet" cakes with them. The chickens gobbled the cakes right up and it felt good to warm their tummies! You can find an easy tutorial [right here](#).

I hope you feel more confident about your flock's ability to make it through the winter beautifully. If you would like to learn more, check out the video below!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mjrqmjK3p8&t=3s>