



General Care for Chickens

Chickens are friendly, low-maintenance pets that can also be a valuable addition to any homestead. They provide fresh eggs, natural pest control, and can even be entertaining with their unique personalities. Caring for chickens requires some basic knowledge about their housing, feeding, health, and general welfare. This manual will guide you through the essentials of chicken care to help you keep your flock happy and healthy.

1. Housing and Environment

Coop and Shelter:

- **Size and Space:** Ensure your chicken coop is large enough to allow for each chicken to move freely. A general rule of thumb is 2-3 square feet per chicken inside the coop and 8-10 square feet per chicken in an outdoor run.
- **Ventilation:** Proper ventilation is key to preventing respiratory issues and reducing humidity. Ensure there are vents or windows in the coop to allow for airflow.
- **Security:** Chickens are vulnerable to predators such as raccoons, foxes, and hawks, so make sure the coop is secure with solid walls, a lockable door, and a fenced-in run area. The fencing should be buried a few inches underground to prevent predators from digging under.

Bedding:

- **Types of Bedding:** Use bedding such as straw, hay, or wood shavings in the coop to absorb moisture and provide comfort. Change bedding regularly to keep the coop dry and odor-free.
- **Nest Boxes:** Provide comfortable nest boxes where hens can lay their eggs. Each box should be about 12x12 inches, with 1 box for every 3-4 hens.

2. Feeding and Nutrition

Basic Diet:

- **Layer Feed:** The primary food for adult hens should be a high-quality layer feed that is specially formulated to meet the nutritional needs of egg-laying chickens. This typically includes the right balance of protein, calcium, and other nutrients.
- **Grains and Treats:** You can supplement their diet with grains like cracked corn, as well as healthy treats such as vegetables, fruits, and mealworms. Avoid feeding chickens harmful foods like onions, garlic, or chocolate.

- **Fresh Water:** Always provide access to fresh, clean water. Chickens drink a lot, especially in hot weather, so ensure their water containers are refilled regularly.

Calcium and Oyster Shells:

- **Calcium for Laying Hens:** Laying hens require extra calcium to help them produce strong eggshells. Provide oyster shell or crushed eggshells as a supplement to their regular diet. Keep it in a separate container so hens can eat it when needed.

3. Daily Care and Maintenance

Feeding Schedule:

- Chickens should be fed once or twice daily. Ensure that they have enough food to last throughout the day but avoid overfeeding, as this can lead to waste.
- Make sure to clean up any leftover food to prevent attracting pests like rodents or flies.

Egg Collection:

- **Egg Gathering:** Collect eggs at least once a day to ensure they are fresh and to prevent hens from eating them. It's best to gather eggs in the morning and again in the evening if necessary.
- **Egg Storage:** Store eggs in a cool, dry place. If you plan on keeping them for an extended period, it's best to refrigerate them.

4. Health and Veterinary Care

Health Monitoring:

- **Daily Checkups:** Observe your chickens daily for signs of illness, such as lethargy, feather loss, limping, or unusual droppings. Early detection is key to preventing the spread of disease.
- **Parasite Control:** Chickens can be prone to parasites like lice, mites, and worms. Regularly check your chickens for signs of infestation and consult a veterinarian for deworming and treatments as needed.

Vaccinations:

- **Common Vaccines:** Some chickens may need vaccinations to protect against diseases like Marek's disease or coccidiosis. Consult your vet to determine the vaccines that are necessary for your area.

Beak and Claw Care:

- Chickens' beaks and claws may require occasional trimming if they become overgrown. A vet or experienced poultry caretaker can help you with this.

5. Exercise and Mental Stimulation

Outdoor Time:

- Chickens need plenty of outdoor time to forage, scratch the ground, and engage in natural behaviors. If possible, let them roam in a safe, enclosed area where they can explore and exercise.

Enrichment:

- Provide enrichment to keep your chickens mentally stimulated. This can include hanging cabbage heads for them to peck at, providing dust baths, or using toys like mirror balls or treat dispensers.
- Chickens are also social animals, so keeping at least 3-4 chickens together is ideal to prevent loneliness and reduce stress.

6. Seasonal Care

Winter Care:

- **Keep Them Warm:** While chickens can tolerate cold weather, they should be kept in a dry, well-ventilated coop. In extremely cold climates, you may need to provide additional bedding or a heat source to prevent frostbite, especially on combs and wattles.
- **Frozen Water:** Ensure their water doesn't freeze in the winter months. Heated water containers can help prevent this issue.

Summer Care:

- **Shade and Cooling:** During hot weather, chickens need access to shade and fresh water. Chickens can easily overheat, so consider providing them with a cool place to retreat during the hottest part of the day.
- **Fly Control:** Use fly traps or natural repellents to help keep flies away, as they can cause irritation and spread disease.

7. Breeding and Hatching

Breeding:

- If you plan to breed chickens, make sure to select healthy, well-bred birds to ensure good offspring. Keep a rooster with hens if you want fertilized eggs.

Incubation and Hatching:

- Hens are often good at incubating their eggs, but if you're incubating eggs artificially, use a proper incubator. Make sure to keep the temperature and humidity at the right levels for successful hatching.
- **Chick Care:** Once chicks are hatched, they need special care, including warmth (using a heat lamp), proper food, and access to clean water.

8. Predators and Protection

- **Predator Proofing:** Chickens are vulnerable to predators like foxes, raccoons, hawks, and neighborhood dogs. Ensure the coop is secure with strong fencing (preferably buried a

few inches underground to prevent digging).

- **Nighttime Safety:** Always lock the chickens in the coop at night to protect them from nocturnal predators.

Caring for chickens can be a rewarding and fulfilling experience, whether you're raising them for eggs, as pets, or for their ability to help with pest control. By providing the right environment, nutrition, healthcare, and enrichment, your chickens will thrive and contribute to your home in many ways. Proper care and attention will ensure they stay healthy, happy, and productive for years to come.