



Hen Basics

The following information was compiled from a list of sources provided at the end of this document. This information should be used as a starting point for understanding the best management practices for the keeping of chickens in an urban area.

CHICKEN FACTS

- ☞ Chickens are ground dwelling birds, but can fly for short distances. They are very social creatures that depend on one another for companionship and security. Chickens can live 14 years or more.
- ☞ Layers need approximately 15 hours of light a day in order to keep laying. You may wish to provide an artificial light source during the darker winter months or you may wish to give your hen the natural break during the winter.
- ☞ Egg laying for a hen generally starts at 6 months old. Domesticated hens have been bred to lay one egg a day, but by 18 months of age, egg laying generally diminishes and many adult or senior hens stop laying altogether. Purebred chickens or heritage breeds tend to lay eggs longer.
- ☞ The majority of a hen's waking hours are spent active, grazing, foraging for food (plants, bugs and occasionally small rodents), dust bathing, preening, playing and napping.
- ☞ Chickens are sociable creatures.

Needs & Behaviour

- ☞ Hens need living space that is dry, draft free and provides safety from both predators and pests.
- ☞ Chickens are social animals. Generally, 3-5 compatible chickens can be well maintained in a typical city environment. Individual bird's age and temperament can affect compatibility. Overcrowding, boredom and barren pens are the most common cause of behavior problems.
- ☞ Taking a dust bath is the closest thing to heaven for a chicken. They bathe in the sun and in loose dry soil depressions in the dirt which cleans their feathers and helps rid them of parasites. Birds will usually dig their own hole for dust baths. If they are unable to dig their own dirt bath area you will need to provide one. Keep the soil in the dust bath loose and add play sand if it is a heavy clay soil. Adding a little poultry dust, diatomaceous earth or wood ash increases the effectiveness of parasite control. Large heavy rubber feed buckets filled with play sand are a welcome addition to the indoor coop in the winter.



Costs

- ☞ Besides construction of a chicken coop and pen, and purchase of the hens start up costs also include food storage, security locks, lighting, and feed & water dishes.
- ☞ Ongoing costs include building maintenance & cleaning, bedding, food, nutritional supplements, parasite control, grooming, vet care, and care when you are away over a longer period of time.

Humane treatment

- ☞ Never handle a chicken by wings, feet or legs. Herd birds to a corner using slow deliberate movement. Fast=predator, slow=less threat. Place hands over top part of wings (shoulders) and hold securely but do not squeeze too hard. Pick up and hold under arm to keep wings in place. Support feet with other hand if bird will tolerate. To restrain for transport or examination, drape a towel over shoulders cape style and wrap around body.
- ☞ Are they breathing heavily? Check that they have enough shade to find a spot where they can cool off.
- ☞ Are they losing feathers? The proverbial “pecking order” may be in effect. If any of the chickens are bleeding, consider separating it, as other chickens will continue to peck at the wound. Loss of feathers could mean that a hen is moulting. Moulting is the natural shedding and renewal of feathers and occurs about once a year. It is a difficult time for birds, since it involves hormonal fluctuations and increased energy requirements. Moulting normally occurs at the end of an intensive laying period and can take about seven weeks for the new feathers to complete the growth cycle.

Feed

- ☞ Feed supply stores are a good source for pelleted poultry feed (for large breeds) or crumble (for bantam breeds). You can get regular or organic, just make sure it is the larger pellets for adults or a starter mix for chicks.
- ☞ Always make sure the food and water are fresh, cool, and clean.
- ☞ Put the feed in a covered feeder and replace it regularly, as it does go stale. Never let your chickens eat damp feed! Chickens also love table scraps.
- ☞ Food receptacles should be made of non-corrosive material that is easily cleaned. This minimizes spillage, prevents contamination with droppings and keeps food the dry. The containers should be large enough for all the birds to comfortably eat at once or numerous enough to prevent competition or intimidation.
- ☞ They are effective weed eaters and insect control. Fresh and cracked corn is a favourite as well as tomatoes, apples, anything baked, and whole grains.
- ☞ Steer clear of giving your chickens onions and garlic, as it can flavour the eggs.
- ☞ Chickens are inquisitive and voracious eaters of vegetation and many ornamental garden plants can be toxic to them. Learn which of your plants might be harmful and be sure your hens cannot reach them through the fencing.
- ☞ Clean up uneaten food and any kitchen scrapes that you may give them soon after they feed in order to avoid attracting nuisance animals.
- ☞ Also provide crushed oyster shells as a source of calcium.

Water

- ☞ Water receptacles should be made of non---corrosive material that can be cleaned and disinfected with a solution of chlorine bleach, prevent contamination with droppings and is spill and leak proof.
- ☞ The containers should be large enough for all the birds to comfortably drink at once and hold enough water for all birds for an entire day.
- ☞ Food should be slightly positioned higher than the water or far enough away to prevent contamination with food.
- ☞ In the cold weather you will need to ensure that their drinking water does not freeze.

Health Basics

- ☞ Prevent contact with wild birds and other animals;
- ☞ Clean the coop regularly;
- ☞ Keep the coop dry and ventilated;
- ☞ Keep new and returning birds separate from the rest of the flock for a period (approx. 10 days);
- ☞ Be on the look out for signs of disease. Some possible symptoms to look for indicating injury/illness/disease include: Coughing, wheezing, labored breathing, warts/scabs, swollen joints, loss of feathers, reduced egg production, thin egg shells, fever, enlarged abdomen;

INTRODUCING NEW HENS

When bringing in new birds a 2 week quarantine in a separate area is recommended to watch for signs of illness and parasites. Avoid noisy, high traffic areas and allow the bird to acclimate before introducing to other birds, animals and family.

Breeds

See www.poultry.allotment.org.uk/ & specifically:
http://www.poultry.allotment.org.uk/Chicken_a/hybrid-pure-breed-chickens.php

CHICKEN COOP

- ☞ The key is to make your coop a safe, dry and draft free place for the chickens to lay their eggs, roost, eat, drink and sleep.
- ☞ The coop needs to be a closed structure which provides shelter from cold, heat, wind, rain, snow, and predators.
- ☞ Coop and pen should be located in an area that provides shade, direct sunlight, good drainage and protection from prevailing winds and will not present a problem to neighbours.



Ventilation and Light:

- ☞ To stay healthy, your chickens need plenty of ventilation and light.
- ☞ Chickens have a thick coat of feathers to keep them warm, but they are vulnerable to poor air quality and pathogens in the litter.
- ☞ Chickens may be unwilling to eat in the dark which means they can starve even if there is plenty of food available.
- ☞ Doors, windows and vents near the ceiling supply oxygen, remove heat, harmful gasses and dust particles, and dilute disease causing airborne organisms. However, if they are huddling together in a particular spot it could be the sign of a draft at their level that will need to be blocked.
- ☞ Design and construct your chicken coop with good ventilation through the roof eaves and windows that open making sure that openings are pest and predator proof (cover with at least ½ inch metal screen). Windows or skylights will provide the light they need.
- ☞ To keep your chicken coop cool on hot summer days locate your coop in a shaded area.



Doors

- ☞ Doors for chickens should be just large enough for the largest bird and can be positioned anywhere from ground level to about 2 feet high with a stable ramp with cleats.
- ☞ Doors must be able to be secured against predators at night.
- ☞ Do not forget to provide easy human access so you can collect eggs and clean the entire coop.

Bedding

- ☞ Regardless of the floor type, bedding material strewn on the surface is needed to absorb feces and spilled water to keep the chicken's feet dry.
- ☞ Material for the floor should be clean, non-toxic, biodegradable, and easily replaceable.
- ☞ Play sand, leaves, straw or hay, shredded paper, or wood shavings work best and can be composted.
- ☞ It is important to rake out the bedding and replace it frequently to reduce odor and fly activity.
- ☞ Make sure that the bedding material is never left long enough to become moldy.

Floor

- ☞ The floor should not collect and hold moisture. It should be easy to clean, be able to retain heat in cold weather and keep out rodents and predators.
- ☞ A wood floor is adequate provided it is at least a foot off the ground, insulated and sealed properly, but wood is difficult to sanitize because it is porous.
- ☞ A concrete floor discourages rodents and predators and is easy to sanitize.



Roost

- ☞ Chickens need somewhere for the chickens to perch at night. Determining the right chicken coop roost height is important in keeping your chickens comfortable and healthy.
- ☞ Chickens do not usually sleep on floors. Their nature makes them look for an elevated place to sleep to protect themselves from predators.
- ☞ The best material to use for perches or roost bars is wood. Lumber or branches can be used. They should be strong enough and mounted securely enough to hold all birds. The surface should be rough for good grip with no splinters or sharp edges.
- ☞ For medium sized birds, 2" or 4" flat or 1 1/2" diameter is best for foot comfort.
- ☞ The longer the roost the better to prevent competition.
- ☞ They should be set 18" from wall, 2-4 feet off the floor. If mounted higher, rung steps are needed spaced 8---12 inches apart.
- ☞ You may wish to provide removable litter boxes or planks directly below the roost for easy cleaning.



Roof

- ☞ The coop roof should be made of a material that will not collect and hold heat.
- ☞ The roof surface should at least be covered with an insulating tar paper to protect from heavy rains.
- ☞ The roof should be slightly inclined, to allow water to run off and if it overhangs it will protect from downpours.
- ☞ A few small openings along the eaves allow moisture to escape and provide fresh air.

Nest box

- ☞ Provide one nest box for every 2-3 hens.
- ☞ The boxes should be filled with 2-4 inches of straw, wood shavings, litter or grass.
- ☞ Chickens prefer wooden nest boxes with covered opening for privacy. Place the boxes on or as low to the floor as possible. If set higher they require a perch in front of the opening.



Cleaning

- ☞ A good hosing off of the coop once a year with a spray of a vinegar or environmentally friendly cleaning solution is required.
- ☞ Once every week or two (depending on how many chickens you have in how little space), clean out the coop, wipe down the perches, and scrub down their feeders.
- ☞ If the chickens are laying, thoroughly clean their nest boxes, especially if an egg cracked at one point.
- ☞ Keeping their environment clean will also keep your neighbors from complaining.
- ☞ Chicken manure does have an odor of ammonia so it does need to be absorbed by bedding. Cleaning out the bedding will keep the odor down bedding can be put in a compost.

Outdoor Run

- ☞ The fenced area surrounding the coop that provides secure access to exercise, sunlight, earth and vegetation and is freely available to the birds when they are unsupervised during the day.
- ☞ Give your chickens room to roam, give them a good spot to get out of the weather and up off the ground.
- ☞ It needs to be constructed to prevent the bird's escape and prevent entry by intruders/predators. Predators of chickens in an urban area include: dogs, cats, and raccoons. It's best to build the strongest deterrents possible.
- ☞ Don't use chicken wire, as it is too flimsy and is easily torn into.
- ☞ Chain link panels or welded or woven fencing on a sturdy frame reinforced at the bottom is better.
- ☞ Protect against burrowing vermin such as rats, mice or racoons by burying about 6 inches of the fencing wire below ground level and curling it outwards. Then when pests try to dig under the wire to get in your coop, they run into the wire instead.
- ☞ The outdoor pen must also be enclosed to keep hens in and predators out. Covering the pen with a roof such as corrugated fiberglass can provide shade and rain shelter.
- ☞ Regular inspection is key to security.
- ☞ Providing a wind and rain/snow break will give the birds a protected area to be outdoors even in winter.
- ☞ If the coop is elevated 2 feet so the chickens can use the space underneath, the coop and pen should not occupy the exact same footprint.
- ☞ Do not forget to provide adequate opening and space for a person to be able to clean the entire outdoor pen area and to be able to catch hens if needed.



SOURCES

www.brittonclouse.com/chickenrunrescue/, Mary Britton Clouse. 2010.

<http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/LICANDINSP/animalcontrol/chicken/index.htm>, City of Vancouver, Animal Control.

Management Guide for the Backyard Flock. Jean E. Sander, Extension Veterinarian and Michael P. Lacy, Extension Poultry Scientist Cooperative Extension Service. The University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences. Revised by Claudia Dunkley, Extension Poultry Scientist. 2009.