



Care and Feeding of Baby Chicks

Baby chicks are like any other baby – they need fresh food and water, and to be kept clean and warm.

Brooder

Keeping chicks warm entails a brooder. A good brooder will have several things – it will keep chicks safe, have either bedding to absorb wastes or a wire mesh floor to allow droppings to pass through, and a heat source. A brooder can be as simple as a cardboard box with two to three inches of wood shavings for bedding, or as complex as a commercial metal box brooder. For a few chicks, cardboard has the advantage of being cheap, disposable/recyclable, and sanitary. A wooden or metal brooder is more appropriate for larger numbers of chicks, or if you raise many batches of chicks per season. It should be scrubbed and disinfected between uses. Brooders should be large enough to allow the chicks to get away from the heat source – 3'x4' is a good size for a few chicks and will allow plenty of room for them to grow, as they grow very quickly. For the first few days, place paper toweling or an old cloth towel over the litter, so the peeps learn to eat food, not litter. Keep the brooder clean – change litter at least once a week, more if you have many chicks. Damp dirty litter and droppings can cause respiratory problems and infections. Also, chicks should never be brooded on newspaper – its surface is too slick and can cause leg problems.

Heat Source

For a small number of chicks, a 100- 150 watt hanging or clamp-style work lamp is sufficient heat. Clamp to the side of the box and have the bulb and hood hanging over the side. For a greater number of chicks, a 250-watt infrared bulb can be used. Infrared bulbs get very hot – they should be kept a minimum of 18 inches away from flammable items (such as wooden or cardboard walls, and wood shavings). If using an infrared bulb, be sure to use a *porcelain* socket – plastic will melt. A brooder should not be evenly heated. It should have a cooler area for chicks to find their level of comfort. For the first week of life, the brooder should be at about 95 degrees. Chicks will let you know if the brooder is too hot or too cold. Too hot, and the birds will crowd as far from the heat as possible. Too cold, and they will huddle under the light and peep loudly. Raise or lower the heat source accordingly. If you cannot physically raise or lower the lamp, use a different wattage bulb. For each successive week, the temperature should be lowered 5 degrees until completely feathered out at four to five weeks. If located out of drafts, they should not need any additional heat beyond this age.

Water

Fresh, clean water should be available to chicks at all times. The water should be cool, not hot and not cold. Birds drink to cool themselves down – if they start going through too much water, they may be overheated and the brooder temperature needs to be lowered. For 10 or fewer chicks, a quart-size chick fount will take them through several weeks; for more chicks or older birds, a gallon fount will be a more appropriate size. You'll know if you need a larger waterer if you need to fill more than once per day. Water should never be provided in an open dish – chicks will track droppings and spilled feed through it and invite disease. For the first few days, the waterer can be placed directly on the toweling. When the toweling has been removed, place the waterer on a non-slip elevated surface, like a wire platform, to prevent the chicks from scratching litter into their water. Increase height as they grow older – bricks or 2X4" wire-covered lumber boxes are equally useful.

Food

Baby chicks need to eat chick starter mash or crumbles, a blend specially formulated for their growth and development. Layer mash, crumbles, or pellets should never be fed to chicks, not even as an emergency ration. It has a high calcium content that is toxic to chicks and will cause bone, liver, and kidney problems or cause death. A good emergency ration is a 50-50 blend of rolled oats and cornmeal, whirled in a food blender to a mash or crumble consistency. They should not be on this emergency ration for more than a day or so, as it does not constitute a balanced diet. Starter feeds should contain no greater than 21% protein for dual-purpose or egg-type chickens – too much protein causes growth problems. For the first few days, sprinkle feed on a paper towel so that chicks can learn to eat. Chick feeders come in many styles, but they should prevent feed spillage and wasting, and prevent contamination with litter or droppings. Elevating the feeder after the first few days helps. Again, open dishes are not the best choice of feeder for chicks.

Chickens have no teeth – they need grit in the form of small rocks to grind their food. Chick grit consists of very small stones, like coarse sand, similar to parakeet grit. It should never contain oyster shell or other forms of calcium – excess calcium is very detrimental to chicks. Most store-bought small grit preparations already have oyster shell in them. You can “make” your own chick grit by purchasing a bag of decomposed granite from a building supply store. Wash the granite in a large tub, rinsing out fine sand and mud, and letting it dry. Use the larger pieces for adult chickens, and sprinkle a bit of the smaller grains on the chick starter, as if you were salting food. If chicks are given no additional food other than chick starter, they don’t NEED grit but it may help in certain situations (see below).

Chicks can go out on grass or range on warm days at a couple of weeks of age, if the lawn is unsprayed and grit is provided with their feed. Chicks should only be allowed to range on clean ground, preferably where no adult chickens have been for 6-12 months to prevent bacterial or parasitic infestations. Grit may also be a good idea if you are using wood shavings as litter – it will help prevent crop impaction if litter is accidentally ingested.

Diarrhea and vent pasting (droppings sticking to their behinds) is a common problem in very young chicks. This is caused by a variety of problems, most often due to the brooder being too cold. If pasting does occur, increase the brooder’s temperature and carefully pick off the dried droppings (warm water helps) so the vent does not become blocked. If pasting continues, try a blend of plain rolled oats processed in a blender mixed 50-50 with chick starter. Sprinkling chick grit on their feed also helps prevent pasting.

Chicks should be fed 20% protein chick starter until 6 months of age or the first egg is laid. At that time, they can be switched to 16% - 18% lay pellets, crumbles, or mash. Additional calcium (for adults only) in the form of crushed oyster shell is beneficial, especially if chickens free range or are fed table scraps. Broilers or meat chickens must be fed either broiler grower or turkey/gamebird starter from about 4 weeks of age until slaughter at about 8-10 weeks.

General management and FAQs

Chicks that are listless, huddled with drooping wings, and have blood in the stools may have coccidiosis, a protozoan infestation. Good sanitation with clean, dry litter (avoid damp wet spots from spilled water) and not letting chicks range on land where adult chickens have been living will prevent coccidiosis. Antibiotics will not cure coccidiosis – only sulfa drugs such as Sulmet will treat it. Preventing this common chickhood disease through good sanitation is a much better course of action. Chicks will gain a natural immunity to coccidia as they mature.

Chickens are social flock creatures – you should never have just one. They need a buddy.

Chicks and adults can become habitual feather pickers, where they pick at newly growing blood quills. Causes of this range from overcrowding, overheating, too much light, not enough protein, etc. This habit must be stopped early – feather picking can become difficult to break. Giving leafy greens to pick at, increasing brooder space, lowering heat, proper nutrition, and reducing light by lowering the wattage or switching to a red-colored bulb may help. Access to free range, grass, and greens curtails this almost immediately.

Roosts can be provided for layer replacements or dual-purpose breeds beginning about four weeks of age, raising them higher as the birds grow older. Allow 4-inches of roost space for 4-week olds, 12-18 inches for adults. Chickens prefer flat roosts, like a 2"x4" with the flat side up. Broilers or other meat birds should not be given roosts because it can cause crooked keels and breast blisters. 3"-4" of bedding should be provided for broilers.

Chickens are happiest when they have more room. Coops and runs that allow more than the minimum space make healthier, happier birds. The minimum space requirements for open housing (coop with free range) is 4 sq. ft. per bird; for confined housing (never allowed outside) is 10 sq. ft. per bird.

Hens do not need roosters to lay eggs – they will produce eggs without a mate, but they won’t be fertile and cannot hatch.

Chicken feed comes in mash, crumbles, and pellets. Chickens can waste an enormous amount of feed – and feed spilled on the ground can become wet, moldy, and toxic. Pellets are the least wasteful form, followed by crumbles and then mash. Feeders hanging or placed at the level of the birds’ backs will help prevent feed wastage. Placing the feeder with feed in a covered metal container at night will prevent rodent infestation.

Hen scratch or other whole or cracked grain mixes are tasty treats for chickens. But, as with all treats, they should be fed in limited amounts. Scratch is not a balanced diet as it generally contains about 9% protein – much too low for a growing youngster or laying hen. Scratch should be fed as a treat, not as a primary feed. Kitchen scraps are fine, as long as they do not contain salt. Death by salt toxicosis is common in backyard birds.

Nest boxes should be provided at about 4 -5 months of age, to allow the birds to get used to them. The sooner you provide nests, the more likely they will use the nests rather than laying their eggs on the ground.

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