



Backyard Chickens: Lifespan: 5-11 years

While many chickens kept in backyard flocks are laying, meat, or dual-purpose breeds there are numerous “fancy” chicken breeds ranging from the diminutive bantam Old English breeds to the grandiose phoenix whose tails can reach several feet long. This care sheet is mainly geared towards chickens, however much of it can be applied to other poultry such as pheasants, guinea fowl, turkeys, and quail.

Diet:

Commercial poultry feeds (pelleted rations) are specifically formulated to provide for different species (chickens versus ducks), different purposes (laying versus meat), and differing ages of birds (starter, grower, finisher and layer).

To know which type of diet to feed your flock answer these questions first:

- What age are the birds you are feeding?
- What type of birds are you feeding?
- What is the purpose of the birds, laying eggs or meat production, of the birds?

A common mistake is feeding the wrong diet. Young chicks should not be offered a layer diet, it contains too much calcium. Instead, they should be fed a starter or grower diet which has lower levels of calcium and appropriate protein. Similarly, ducks should not be fed diets specifically formulated for chickens and vice versa. Additionally, do not mix scratch grains with a complete commercial ration. Scratch grains include cracked corn and other grains that are low in protein and high in carbohydrates. These will effectively dilute the protein level as well as the vitamins and minerals. This could lead to problems during growth, decreases in egg production and higher susceptibility to disease. Finally, not feeding enough of the appropriate diet be detrimental to development and egg production. Pellets should always be available as different members of the flock may not be able to be at the feeder at the same time.

Glossary of Feed Terms:

- **Chick Starter:** Diet for day-old chicks to 6 weeks, usually presented as a small crumble for small beaks. Often contains a medication to help prevent coccidiosis (parasite) infection.
- **Pullet Grower:** For mixed sex flocks and layer chicks from 8 weeks until 16-18 weeks of age or until lay (20 weeks of age). Usually presented as a crumble pellet and can be medicated to prevent coccidiosis.
- **Layer Diets:** From the time of start of lay it can be fed throughout the life span of the flock. It provides Vitamin D₃ and calcium for strong egg shells. Should make up the majority of the diet; other feed such as green scraps, pasture, and hay may be fed but only small amounts (due to potential dilution).
- **Broiler (Meat) Diets:** Broiler starter is for meat birds from hatch until 4 weeks of age. Then Broiler finisher is fed from then on until use. For turkeys it can be used from 6 weeks until market. Medicated broiler diets provide good protection to turkey poults against coccidiosis.
- **Mixed flock:** A diet that can provide for multiple species including chickens, ducks, geese, guinea fowl, and quail. However, these should be primarily ornamental birds where their primary purpose is not to lay.



- **Scratch Grain Mixes:** Are not a balanced or complete feed but can be used as enrichment for natural pecking and scratching behaviours or during moulting. The birds enjoy it and it can be used to help prevent problems such as cannibalism and egg eating which can arise when birds aren't as contented and busy. If poultry receive too much scratch grains and not enough of their pelleted diet, their overall nutrition and egg production may be reduced.

Greens:

Scraps: Leftover salad greens, fruit, vegetables and even grass clippings may be fed. Just make sure that at least 80-90% of the diet is a balanced complete pelleted diet appropriate of the age and production status of the flock. Free ranging chickens will often graze and pick at different grasses and insects in the yard. Be mindful that any pesticides or herbicides used are safe for your chickens to ingest.

Supplements:

Grit: No grit is necessary if providing a layer diet, but if hens are also being fed scratch grains or are free-range then insoluble grit should be provided to help them grind up feed in the crop. Feed approximately 0.5lb/50 hens twice weekly. Feeding egg shells as a calcium source is generally not a good idea as it can encourage egg eating.

Water:

Clean water should be available at all times. This can be accomplished with bowls, water dispensers, or fountains.

Moulting:

Moulting is a normal phenomenon that occurs during autumn with the onset shorter days signalling birds to stop laying and lose their feathers. Birds need to prepare for the cold winter months and make sure their feathers in the best condition, so they need to take a break from egg laying to put all their energy into growing feathers.

Moulting first occurs when birds are about 18 months old, and for most birds it takes about 8 weeks for feather loss and 16 weeks for feather growth. It is important that proper nutrition and management occur during moulting. This includes switching to a ration that has less calcium as egg laying is not occurring, and providing more protein for feather growth. This could be a starter or grower diet that has about 18-20% protein and lower calcium. Once egg laying re-starts then transition back over to a layer pellet over 7-10 days by mixing the two rations together.

Housing:

Chickens should be provided with a shelter (house, coop, barn) and an area that they can forage during the day. Approximately 8-10 square feet per bird and 1 nest box (dimensions slightly larger than your birds) for 4-5 birds. Proximity to the house is important as you may want to run electricity or water to the shelter. Choose an area with good drainage as birds will move around a lot following rain scratching around in the mud. Face the front of the coop and all the windows to the south to provide good ventilation and avoid large temperature fluctuations. Coop temperatures should be maintained between 10-24°C. During extreme freezing, birds will shunt blood away from their extremities, toes and combs turn blue/black and are at risk of frostbite and falling off. During extreme heat, above 30°C, monitor cooling areas with mist or shade and make sure birds continue to drink water.



The floor should be concrete and the walls washable for ease of cleaning and disinfection. Ventilation is important for; moisture removal, excess heat removal, exchange of gases (litter), and provision of fresh air. Without adequate ventilation, increased humidity can lead to respiratory problems. Options include air inlets along the roof line, or the slight cracking of a window in cooler months to ensure that not too much warm air and moisture is removed. Chickens do not need special lighting, but light intensity and duration can be used to regulate egg laying. Increasing daylength in spring is natural stimulation for egg laying. Appropriate litter to use could include pine shavings, rice hulls or even sand. Avoid hardwood shavings as they hold moisture and can provide a good environment for mold growth.

Consider what predators you may have in your area (hawks, foxes, dogs, and cats) and how best to protect your flock. It may require that some fencing wire is buried below the surface of to prevent the predators from digging underneath fences or barriers. Fence wire size should be small enough to keep vermin (mice, rats, minks, weasel's etc.) from gaining access to your birds as they can carry disease. If there are many birds of prey in your area, you may consider having a covered area for your flock to forage. Have sturdy windows and doors to prevent predators from getting into the coop at night when the chickens are most vulnerable. Build in multiple redundancies in case part of the enclosure fails. Check the enclosure regularly for structural damage.

Exercise and enrichment:

Provide various perches for your flock to roost. Most chickens will naturally go to these areas at night to sleep. Some chickens like heavy broilers or silkies, are not able to fly up to these roosts. Chickens should be provided with an area to forage on grasses and insects. You may consider rotating through several areas to prevent them from overgrazing the plants. Foraging toys can be provided to mentally stimulate the hens.

See the Association of Avian Veterinarians Enrichment blog for more ideas for foraging for backyard flocks:
<https://www.aav.org/blogpost/1778905/AAV-Enrichment-Tips>

Schedule of veterinary care:

- Vaccines
 - If you purchase your chicks from a commercial hatchery, they should be completely vaccinated.
 - If you purchase your chicks from another backyard flock or hatch them yourself they will need to be vaccinated by a veterinarian.
 - Marek's Disease is a fatal disease of chickens and birds need to be vaccinated in the egg or at one-day-old.
- Annual Exams
 - Complete physical examination by an experienced avian veterinarian.
 - Accurate measurement of your bird's weight. A drop in weight can be a very early indicator of illness, long before other signs of illness appear.
 - You can also keep track of this at home by doing monthly or bimonthly weight checks and keeping track of it over time.
 - Faecal and choanal cytology. This microscopic examination of a swab from your bird's mouth and from faeces can detect unusual bacteria, yeast or other fungal organisms, red or white blood cells, parasites and other abnormalities
 - Haematocrit and total serum solids. A single drop of blood collected from your bird allows us to estimate protein levels and detect anaemia, another early indicator of illness.



Biosecurity is the practice of reducing your flock's exposure to infectious diseases. There are numerous ways to do this including getting new additions from reputable sources, preventing contamination by outside animals (new birds or wildlife), and disinfecting or not using tools that have been exposed to other poultry. For more detailed information you can follow the links at the bottom of the page.

- Human Safety
 - Most flocks are kept for human consumption of their eggs or meat. If any of your birds are given a medication of any sort, please contact your veterinarian for appropriate withdrawal times. After a bird is given a medication, it may be present in the meat or eggs. A withdrawal time is the amount of time it takes for the medication to work out of the system and no longer be present in these products.
- Common illnesses in chickens include dystocia (or egg binding), trauma, and fatty liver. All of these conditions require immediate veterinary attention.

For more resources on biosecurity visit:

- <http://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/pets/farm-animals/backyard-poultry.html>
- <http://healthybirds.aphis.usda.gov>
- https://www.aphis.usda.gov/publications/animal_health/2013/fsc_biosecurity_tips.pdf

Avian Influenza resources:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Uzhe3pMU8Q>
- https://www.aphis.usda.gov/publications/animal_health/2013/fsc_biosecurity_ai.pdf

Defend your flock for disease webinar:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbtvlbw5NT8>

The Barastoc Chook Book:

- <https://barastocpoultry.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Barastoc-Poultry-Chook-Book-10th.pdf>