



Chicken Care Guide

Backyard (Pet) Chickens Care Guide

Keeping chickens can be a rewarding experience, they make great pets with their fun and inquisitive personalities and provide a good source of eggs. However, some preparation and time commitment is required when caring for chickens. As a minimum, chickens need to be checked twice daily, usually once in the morning to open the coop, check their well-being, replace food and water and remove soiled bedding, and again in the evening to close the coop so they are secure overnight. You also need to plan for pet sitters when you are away from home. We have created this care guide to provide a source of basic advice for your chickens but there are lots of other excellent resources available and we have highlighted a few at the end of this guide.

Backyard chickens can live for 6-10 years with Bantams living for 8-12 years. A healthy hen can lay an egg every 1-4 days. Egg production peaks at 1-2 years old then slowly declines until 5 years old, after which few eggs are produced. Egg production also drops off over the autumn and winter months when the day length is shorter, and during the moulting season.



Chickens are social animals and should not be kept as solitary pets. The minimum number you should keep at any time is 3 hens. The maximum number will be determined by the amount of space you have. All chickens have the same basic requirements to stay healthy: a good quality diet, a clean environment, and protection from the elements and predators but individual breeds will differ in temperament, behaviour, hardiness and egg-laying capabilities.

Sourcing pet chickens:

To source pet chickens in the UK, you can contact local breeders, farmers, or rescue organisations, you can also look for chickens advertised at agricultural shows. Consider researching different breeds and their suitability for your needs and space, and always ensure the chickens are healthy and well-cared for before purchase.

Local Breeders and Farmers:

- ♥ **Local breeders:** Contact breeders in your area for healthy, well-bred chickens.
- ♥ **Farmers:** Check with local farmers, especially those who sell at markets, as they may have chickens for sale or know of local breeders.

Consider rehoming:

Rehoming ex-commercial hens offers a chance to provide a better life for these birds, who are often sent to slaughter at a young age despite having the potential to live much longer. Adopting these hens also benefits the adopters, allowing them to experience the joy of keeping chickens and enjoying fresh eggs at home.

- ♥ **British Hen Welfare Trust:**
- ♥ The British Hen Welfare Trust (BHWT) rehome hens and provides resources for keeping them.
- ♥ **Fresh Start for Hens.** This organisation focuses on rehoming hens from commercial egg production.



Before



After

Housing

Adequate shelter is essential to keep chickens happy and healthy. Even if chickens are free-range, a coop should be provided for secure nighttime housing. Ideally the coop is attached to an outdoor run to permit exercise in a clean safe environment. The type of housing will depend on flock size, space available, cost, disease control and predator proofing.

Life stages:

- ❧ Young chicks under 6 weeks old should be housed indoors in a weather-proof brooder set-up with artificial heating and lighting. From 6-8 weeks old they can have access to a weather-proof outdoor run if it is not too cold. As they continue to grow, they will become hardier and be able to tolerate more extremes in weather. As adults they will prefer to be outside during the daytime so having an outdoor run is essential.
- ❧ Rescue (ex-commercial) hens may also need to be housed indoors initially with a little more TLC. They may have substantial feather loss on arrival and the artificial lighting they have been exposed to means their normal moulting cycle will be disrupted.

Coop:

- ❧ The ideal coop is easily cleaned, provides shelter from the elements and protects the occupants from predators and rodents.
- ❧ It should be roomy, well-insulated, well-ventilated, dry and located in an area of good drainage so the outdoor run does not become too muddy. Alternatively, you could opt for a mobile coop that can be moved as needed.
- ❧ There are many different designs on the market but most are raised off the ground, providing shelter and shade for your hens when outside.



Moulting:

- ❧ Moulting is a normal process that allows chickens to shed damaged or loose feathers and replace them. The process occurs gradually to ensure there are enough feathers to protect them against the elements, but some hens will drop most of their feathers in one go.
- ❧ Moulting may be triggered in autumn by the shorter day length and end of the laying cycle. However, other factors include stress, hatching eggs, lack of water or changes in the coop can also trigger a moult.
- ❧ Most hens undergo their first moult at around 18 months old, and whilst it is usually in the autumn, but some hens do moult in the summer. A normal moult lasts 2-4 months. Most young birds moult yearly, but older birds may moult more frequently or irregularly.

Space:

- ❧ Space requirements depend on the adult size of the bird but there should be enough space for your chickens to exercise, stretch their wings and carry out normal chicken behaviour.
- ❧ Aim to provide at least 30cm² per bird indoors and 1m² per ex-caged bird or 2m² per ex-free-range bird outside.
- ❧ Every effort should be made to prevent over-crowding as this increases stress and leads to fighting.

Substrate:

- ❧ The material on the ground is important.
- ❧ Absorbent, dust-free material that dries quickly and does not promote the growth of mould should be used inside. For example, wood shavings (not hardwood), shredded paper or sand.
- ❧ Avoid bark chips, straw, and hay as they can develop mould which can be toxic.
- ❧ Grass is ideal outside but remember chickens tend to destroy this quickly and we need to avoid muddy wet environments. To combat this either use a mobile coop and run or put wire mesh down before planting grass to protect the roots from damage. Gravel can also be used in wet areas to improve drainage.



Temperature:

- ☛ Most adult birds can withstand temperature changes except in the extremes.
- ☛ Inside the coop aim for a temperature of 10-24°C. During hot weather you may need to consider fans and misters. With cold weather, supplemental heat may be required using red heat lamps or heated floor mats, although many breeds can cope if they are not moulting.

Ventilation:

- ☛ Housing needs to be weather-proof and draught-free but well-ventilated.
- ☛ A build-up of droppings in the environment leads to ammonia fumes that can damage the respiratory tract. Good ventilation reduces the risk of respiratory diseases by allowing ammonia to escape.
- ☛ Ventilation holes should be situated high up to reduce draughts.

Entrances and exits:

- ☛ Doorways need to be tall enough so your hens can pass through without crouching.
- ☛ They should be wide enough for several hens to pass through at one time to avoid blockage by dominant chicken.
- ☛ There should also be multiple doorways to avoid bullying and encourage use of the outdoor run.

Dust baths:

- ☛ These should be available to encourage preening and good feather quality and can be placed inside the coop or in the run.
- ☛ Diatomaceous earth can be added to dust baths to prevent mite and lice infestations.



Perches:

- ❧ Perches should be 3-5cm wide with rounded edges and at a height to suit the size of your hens. They should be placed above the nest boxes, but not so high that they cause your hens to land heavily when they jump off as this can lead to bruising of the feet and bumblefoot.
- ❧ They also need to be an adequate length to prevent competition – allow for 25cm per hen (15cm if Bantams).
- ❧ The perches should be rough to help remove keratin from the feet - consider using branches covered in bark or wooden dowels covered in artificial turf.



Nest boxes:

- ❧ Nest boxes should be quiet, enclosed, draught-free and lined with a clean, dry, comfortable nesting material for egg laying.
- ❧ There should be at least 1 nest box per 3 hens and these need to be large enough to fit one “seated” hen. They should be located in the lowest, darkest part of the coop.
- ❧ Broodiness is the natural tendency for hens to want to sit on and hatch a clutch of eggs. A broody chicken will take up a position in her favourite nest box and will be agitated if you try to disturb her (ruffled feathers, squawking, pecking). Broodiness is desirable if you want to raise chicks but can become a problem if you have no intention of rearing your own chicks. A broody hen will often focus so much on sitting on her clutch of eggs she will forget to eat and drink, lose body condition, and lose feathers.

🐔 If you find a broody chicken, there are several things you can do to calm her down and reduce this instinct:

- Remove her from the nesting box and collect the eggs regularly – this can be difficult if she does not want to move and she may try to get back in the nest box as soon as you remove her. In this case, block off the nest box that she has been using or place ice cubes in the nest box to discourage her from sitting on the eggs.
- Alternatively, leave her be and wait the 2-3 weeks it would normally take for the eggs to hatch. Monitor closely during this time and remove her from the nest box daily to encourage her to eat, drink and defaecate.
- If your hen is still broody, you can remove her from the coop completely and place her in a cage with a wire bottom. You should provide food and water but no bedding. The wire cage is not the most comfortable and should cool her down to reduce the broodiness. This is usually effective within 3 days – you will know she is no longer broody because she does not fluff her feathers or rush to the nest.



BACKYARD CHICKEN BREEDS



SPECKLED SUSSEX



RHODE ISLAND RED



SILVER LACED WYANDOTTE



SILKIE



BLACK COPPER MARAN



AMERAUCANA



BARRED PLYMOUTH ROCK



POLISH



AUSTRALORP



BLACK SEXLINK



LEGHORN



BUFF ORPINGTON

Outdoor run:

- 🐔 A run is ideal to provide space to forage, exercise and engage in natural behaviours.
- 🐔 They should have
 - Short grass as long grass can cause a blockage in the digestive system.
 - Dry soil for dust bathing and foraging.
 - Enough space for roaming and to section off areas that are too wet, muddy or barren so they can recover.
 - Overhead cover like small trees, purpose-built shelters or an elevated coop to give protection from the sun, bad weather and predators.
 - Food and water provision.
 - Fencing to protect against predators - this needs to be well maintained to ensure your chickens cannot escape or become trapped or injured.
- 🐔 Make sure there are no toxins within reach and avoid using fertilisers, pesticides or herbicides in areas your chickens visit.
- 🐔 Remove any pieces of wire, screws or other small metal objects that your chickens could ingest.

Cleaning:

Regular cleaning and disinfection is important to reduce the levels of parasites, bacteria and viruses that can cause disease in your birds and family.

- 🐔 Feeders and drinkers should be cleaned daily and disinfected every 2-3 days.
- 🐔 Litter should be spot cleaned daily and all the bedding should be changed every 1-2 weeks depending on the number of birds.
- 🐔 Nest boxes and perches should be cleaned weekly.
- 🐔 For small flocks, plastic moulded coops are useful due to the ease of cleaning and reduced risk of red mite, which can be difficult to control in wooden coops.

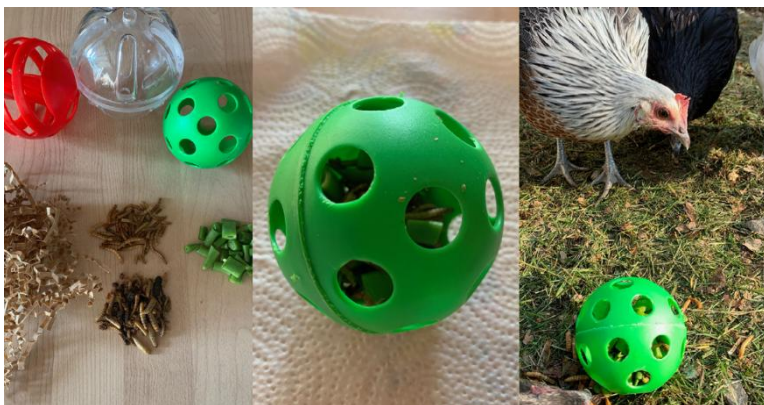
Vermin proofing:

- ✎ Contact with wild birds should be minimised as they will eat the food and can carry diseases like paramyxovirus and avian influenza.
- ✎ Predators like dogs and foxes can be kept out with sturdy wire fencing that extends 90cm along the ground at the bottom or 20cm into the ground. An overhang of wire at the top also stops predators jumping over the fence.
- ✎ Rats and mice should be discouraged through vermin proof feeders (spiral feeders, treadle feeders) and by collecting eggs soon after lay.



Enrichment:

Enrichment improves our chickens' lives by providing mental stimulation and encouraging exercise. A key part of enrichment for our backyard hens is being free-range and having an outdoor run. This allows for scratching and foraging for insects and worms. Toys can be provided like swings, ladders and tunnels. Treats can also be used like treat balls. Many chickens enjoy objects like mirrors.



Feeding

Good nutrition is crucial to maintaining a healthy flock. Nutritional imbalances lead to poor egg production, growth defects, brittle bones and poor egg quality so it is essential we avoid this. All chickens should be fed a commercial crumb or pelleted diet formulated to meet their nutritional needs at each life stage. The pelleted formulation prevents selective feeding, which will lead to an unbalanced diet. Supplements are not required when fed a pelleted diet. However, your chickens may enjoy a treat like grains/scratch or foraging for worms when ranging outside. Grit should also be provided to aid the digestion of food and provide a source of extra calcium.

Commercial feeds:

- ❧ Chicken crumb or starter feed is designed for chicks up to 6 weeks old. It has a high protein content for growth, but should not be fed past 6 weeks old as the protein levels are too high and can lead to health problems.
- ❧ Growers pellets are designed for older chicks and can be fed from 6 to 20 weeks old. They have a slightly lower protein and calcium content making them suitable for this life stage.
- ❧ Layers pellets are designed for laying hens (laying usually starts from 20 weeks old). They have similar protein levels to grower pellets but the calcium content is higher to meet the requirements for egg production. Young birds and non-laying birds should never have access to layers pellets as the high calcium content will cause kidney damage. The average laying chicken requires 120-150g of food per day with slightly more during cold weather and slightly less during the summer.



Grain/scratch:

- ✎ There are various grains and grain mixtures fed to chickens. These can be offered in small quantities as an occasional treat but should not form part of the main diet as they do not meet the nutritional needs of the hens adequately.
- ✎ Wheat is the preferred grain for chickens as it is easily digested and very tasty.

Grit:

- ✎ Chickens lack teeth so the grinding of food takes place in the gizzard (muscular stomach) using small stones that are ingested.
- ✎ It is beneficial to provide chickens with a mixture of digestible and indigestible grit to help this process. The indigestible grit aids grinding of food and the digestible grit (like Oyster shell) provides a source of calcium for laying hens.
- ✎ Grit should be provided in a separate bowl.
- ✎ Chickens will moderate their own intake of grit.

Kitchen scraps:

- ✎ Chickens are classed as production animals so it is illegal to feed kitchen scraps due to the potential for disease spread.
- ✎ Vegetables and fruit can be offered as enrichment but must be fed directly from an allotment or shop, and not allowed to pass through a kitchen.
- ✎ Meal worms can be given in small amounts as treats.

Food storage:

- ✎ All chicken feed should be stored in a clean, dry, rodent and insect-proof container.
- ✎ Keep this container in a cool area away from light, heat and moisture. Excess heat can lead to the breakdown of vitamins and minerals in the food and moisture can lead to the growth of toxic moulds that cause damage to the digestive and nervous system.
- ✎ Always make sure your feed is used before the expiry date to ensure the level of nutrients remains high and the risk of spoilage is low. It is generally recommended to buy an appropriately sized sack of feed so it only lasts a few weeks.

Water:

- ☛ Chickens require a daily supply of fresh drinking water.
- ☛ Chickens drink roughly 50ml of water per kilogram of body weight per day. But when laying they require an additional 100ml of water per day to produce an egg. Warm weather will also increase water intake so check your chickens' water supply frequently on hot days.
- ☛ Water towers are better than trays as the water is less likely to become contaminated with bedding, feed and stools.
- ☛ Ideally, the drinkers should be the height of the back of your smallest bird because chickens love to scratch bedding into their water.
- ☛ The area around the drinker can become damp so the litter in this area may need to be replaced more frequently.



Registration

It is a legal requirement to register all poultry, including backyard chickens, with the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA). This will allow APHA to notify you should there be a notifiable disease outbreak in your area, giving you time to prepare and implement effective measures to protect your chickens.

Biosecurity

Implementing strong biosecurity measures are crucial to prevent spread of diseases like avian influenza. This includes:

- ✎ Maintaining good hygiene including cleaning and disinfecting surfaces, changing or disinfecting shoes before entering and when leaving to avoid transferring stools in/out of the enclosure and washing your hands before and after handling your chickens.
- ✎ Minimising contact with wild birds and rodents by securing food and water, preventing poultry from accessing ponds and standing water frequented by wild birds, rodent-proofing coops, humanely controlling rodent populations and housing birds indoors when required.
- ✎ Quarantine newly purchased birds for at least 2 weeks before introducing them to the rest of the flock. This allows you to monitor for signs of unusual behaviour, illness, or infestations to make sure you are not introducing unknown disease or health problems into your current flock. You can also treat for parasites, especially red mite, and worms, during this time.
- ✎ Keeping different poultry species separate (e.g. chickens, geese, and ducks).
- ✎ Reporting any signs of illness or sudden deaths to your vet immediately.

Health

Chickens have evolved to hide the signs of illness for as long as possible. Birds who look ill will attract predators, which is a danger to the flock, so healthy flock members will attack or ostracise an ill looking bird for the safety of the entire group. This means spotting an ill looking bird can be difficult so regular handling and monitoring of behaviour, body condition, food intake and body weight is vital. If any signs of illness are seen, we recommend seeking veterinary advice as soon as possible.

Signs of illness:

- Lethargy or unwillingness to move
- Weight loss or loss of body condition
- Isolation from the flock or bullying
- Fluffed up feathers
- Dull feathers or loss of feathers
- Scaly legs
- Comb colour change
- Nasal discharge, sneezing coughing
- Closed eyes
- Distended crop
- Enlarged abdomen
- Dirty vent
- Abnormal smell
- Decreased egg production
- Lameness

Sudden deaths:

If you suffer an unexpected loss, it is wise to consider a post mortem to identify the cause of death as this may affect your whole flock. If you would like a post-mortem, place your chicken in a clean plastic bag in a refrigerator and contact your vet. Do not put your bird in the freezer unless advised to do so by your vet.

Vaccination:

Vaccinations are used in commercial poultry flocks to control diseases that can significantly impair egg production and shell quality, or result in large numbers of fatalities.

For most backyard flocks, vaccination is unnecessary unless you encounter a particular disease problem with your chickens or you are frequently buying and selling hens. It is not best practice to mix vaccinated and non-vaccinated birds so you do need to consider where you are sourcing your hens. Most rescue (ex-commercial) hens will have been vaccinated already.

Vets in general practice do not normally offer booster vaccinations for backyard hens as the vaccines are often only available in commercial quantities, but the vaccines can be ordered in if required.

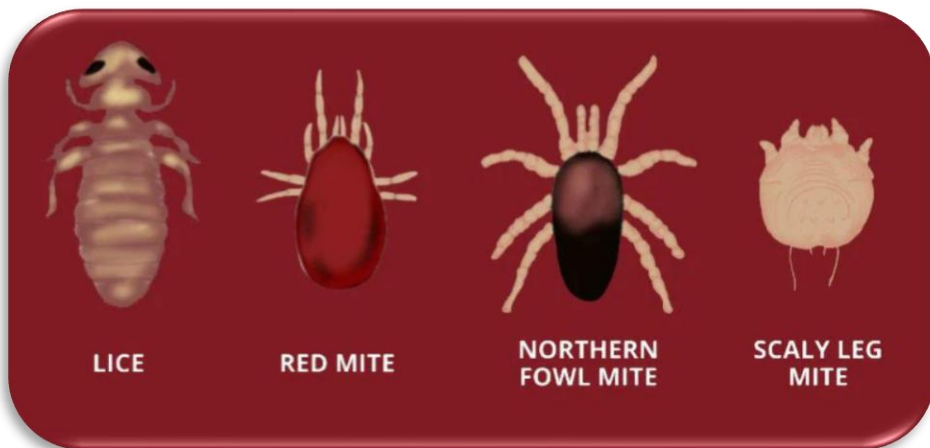
Worming:

It is recommended to worm your chickens 2-4x per year with a licensed broad-spectrum wormer. Alternatively, worm egg counts can be performed on stools to guide treatment decisions. If you are adopting ex-commercial caged hens there is no need to worm immediately as these are unlikely to have worms. But barn or free-range hens should be wormed before introducing to your flock as they are more likely to have worms having had contact with the ground. To keep your hens' worm-free, it is best practice to clean and disinfect the coop during the worming period to destroy worm eggs. Keep the coop dry and mud free and change the bedding regularly. If your hens are confined to a run, worm burdens can be reduced by regularly moving the run or changing the surface material.



Red mite:

Red mites are blood sucking parasites that infest and feed on chickens. They can invade at any time but especially in the warmer summer months. Red mites are visible to the naked eye but are only 0.6-1mm in size so they can be difficult to spot in small numbers. They are yellow/brown in colour and become red after feeding on the blood of your hens. During the day they tend to be found in the cracks and crevices of the coop and on perches, only jumping onto your hens and feeding from them overnight. Mites cause irritation so your hens may scratch and feather peck, they may also be reluctant to enter the coop at night or change their perching habits, in extreme cases they can develop anaemia resulting in a pale wattle and comb, weakness and reduced egg production. It is best to catch an infestation early, before they impact the health of your hens. A tip is to quietly look in the coop after dark. You can get a piece of white paper and press it on any red mites you find to confirm an infestation. You will see red streaks on the white paper if red mites are present.



Prevention of red mite -

- Check the coop and your hens weekly for signs of red mite.
- Clean the coop regularly and avoid a build-up of dirt and dust.
- Quarantine new hens to reduce the risk of introducing red mite.
- Use diatomaceous earth to dust the coop and for dust baths.
- Keep feed under cover and stop wild birds from accessing it.
- Change your clothes if you visit another coop.

Treatment of red mite -

- ✎ Clean and treat the coop. Remove all bedding, litter, perches and nest boxes. Wash out the coop with warm soapy water or detergent and lift off any muck. Let the coop dry before using a disinfectant and apply this at the correct dilution, leaving it to soak for 10-15 mins. Then power wash the coop before leaving it to dry. Repeat the process if you still see mites. Once the coop is entirely dry, dust it with diatomaceous earth.
- ✎ Kill the red mites using Exzolt (prescription only), Dergall mite spray or predator mites.



Lice:

Lice are golden in colour and 1-3mm in length so they are visible to the naked eye. They are fast moving and can be found all over the body. They lay white eggs (nits) in clusters around the base of feathers and these clusters are very hard to remove without plucking the feathers. Low levels of lice cause mild irritation and healthy birds will keep them at bay by preening and dust bathing. However, large numbers of lice lead to restlessness, self-trauma, feather plucking, weight loss and reduced egg production. Heavy infestations are more likely in sick hens or those with damaged or overgrown beaks because they cannot clear the lice through grooming. Lice tend to be a problem in the autumn/winter time and are spread by direct contact. Lice infestations should be treated with a louse powder and this needs to be applied to the birds 3-4x per week for 3 weeks (as lice have a 3-week life cycle). It is important that the product used targets adult live and the eggs. Providing a dust bath made up of a dry mix of wood ash, compost and diatomaceous earth allows hens to clean their feathers and keep lice at bay. You can also use diatomaceous earth or louse powder to dust the coop.

Record keeping:

It is a legal requirement to keep a record of any medications your birds receive. This should include the bird(s) identification, species, breed, age, drug, batch number, dose, route of administration, date and withdrawal time for eggs and meat. If a drug is used off-label via the Prescribing Cascade, then statutory withdrawal times are 7 days for eggs and 28 days for meat.

Sources of information

- British Hen Welfare Trust: <https://www.bhwt.org.uk/>
- RSPCA: <https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/farm/farmanimals/chickens>
- The Chicken Vet: <https://www.chickenvet.co.uk/>
- Surrey Poultry Vet: <https://www.surreypoultryvet.co.uk/>