



All You Need To Know About Chickens!

www.poultrysheds.co.uk

Call us on: 0191 383 1999 or Email us at: info@poultrysheds.co.uk



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While I enjoyed learning about chickens and now run a thriving business from building poultry sheds and rearing chickens etc, I wanted to make it easier for other prospective chicken owners by providing all the basic "how-to" information in a single resource-- free, online, and accessible to all. I hope the following information goes some way to help you make an informed decision.

This ebook advocates and provides information on keeping chickens, but only as pets and only for their eggs. The specialised information you would need to know, should you want to raise chickens for their meat, is not included here.

I hope you find this helpful, and if you do, I encourage you to share it with others! If you do have any questions though while reading this please feel free to email us at:

info@poultrysheds.co.uk or even give us a call on: 0191 383 1999.

So here we go....



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Why Chickens?

Chickens aren't right for everyone - even if you love the idea of having them. Here are a few things to think about:

Do You Think They're Cute?

If you're reading this, you probably do. Excellent! Off to a good start.

Seriously though, if you've spent time around chickens and you're not particularly fond of them, or having them doesn't appeal to you, you may be less inclined to care for them, which isn't good for you or your chickens. And be forewarned: if you love them but your spouse or partner does not, be prepared to be the sole carer!

Can You Dedicate Some Time Each Day?

Although low-maintenance, chickens do require a small amount of daily care as well as some monthly and semi-annual maintenance. Plan on spending 10 minutes a day on your pet chickens, an hour or so per month, plus a few hours twice a year on semi-annual chores. If that sounds like too much, then chickens aren't right for you. (See for more on the necessary daily, weekly and annual chores detailed later.)

Do You Have Enough Space?

Chickens don't require a ton of space. If they'll be "cooped up" with no area outside to freely roam, your coop will need to provide a *minimum* of 10 square feet per bird. On the other hand, if they'll have an outdoor "run" area or will be allowed to range freely, which is preferable, they only require two to four square feet per bird inside the coop, as long as they have at least 10 square feet per bird in the outside run.

That said, the more space the better, both indoors and out! Chickens are great foragers, eating insects, grasses and weeds, and many other scraps/bits they find in the garden/yard. The more foraging they do, the healthier and happier the chickens will be.

Also keep in mind that the less outdoor space they have, the more they will destroy the area they do have. Chickens obsessively scratch up the soil, peck at what they find, and scratch some more. They also dig holes for "dust baths". And they REALLY love to eat plants and weeds. Consequently, if their run area is small, they'll make a dustbowl out of it in a week. On the other hand, give them a large run area - or better yet let them range freely, and your yard will benefit immensely. Their scratching behaviour aerates the soil; their droppings fertilize it; and they'll eat pests such as grubs and ticks.

In case you were wondering, chickens don't "potty train" easily. (Though we do have two customers whose chickens have learned by watching their other pets to either go in the litter box or wait to be taken out, so it is possible...!) However, you CAN keep chickens indoors. Many people do just for the fun of it, but if a chicken is ever injured and needs TLC, it can be a necessity - at least for a while.



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Considering Your Neighbours

If nothing so far has given you pause, you still need to consider your neighbours, especially if they're close by. They may not be educated about chicken-keeping and so could have concerns ranging from noise, to smell (though if you keep and care for your chickens properly this will not be a problem), to feelings that you're "downscaling" the neighbourhood. It might be a good idea for you to check in with them early on and address any concerns. When you do, don't forget to mention all the free, fresh eggs they'll be getting! (Plus, having their support could mean free pet-sitting when you go away for holiday.)

The Cost Factor

Having chickens won't save you money any more than backyard gardeners save money on their tomatoes. There are plenty of good reasons to keep chickens, but this isn't one of them. Between building or purchasing a coop, supplies, and the birds themselves, getting your brood up and running involves some significant upfront expenses. These along with ongoing expenses for food kind of undermine the idea that the eggs are "free."

Cluck, cluck - show me the chickens!

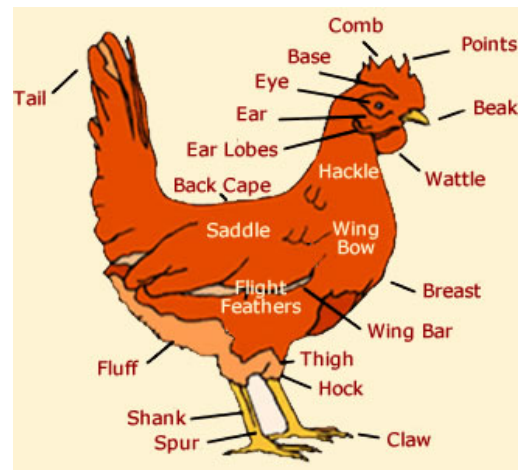
If you've decided you want to raise chickens, CONGRATULATIONS!! You've joined a growing number of people who realise all the benefits these wonderful pets have to offer. This section will help you decide how many chickens to get, which breeds are right for you, whether to start with baby chicks or grown chickens, whether to get cockerels, and finally where you can buy your chickens.

How Many?

Chickens are social birds and they do not fare well on their own, so you should have a minimum of two. As a rule of thumb, two hens per family member should cover your egg needs, or three if your family *really* loves eggs.

Which Breed?

Did you know there are over 400 varieties of chickens? With all those options it can be tough to choose!



[Standard vs. Bantam - Click Here To Learn More](#)

The first decision to make is whether to get Standard (normal-size), also known as "Large Fowl" chickens, or Bantams. At just one to two pounds each, Bantams are a fraction of the size of Standards and are kept mainly for ornamental purposes. Being cute and flashy, they make great pets. But they lay less frequently and their eggs are small, albeit edible. They are also more susceptible to predators - for instance, crows will take your bantams but wouldn't dare to go after your large fowl chickens. For ourselves, we prefer Standards because of their larger eggs and reduced susceptibility to predators (but we do love those adorable Bantams too!) Which ever breed you choose, they will be great companions.

The good news is that you can combine them in a flock, so if you want both types, you're free to mix and match! Many people worry that if they mix their flock, the Bantams will be on the bottom of the pecking order, but we haven't found that to be true at all. Besides, no matter what breeds you ultimately decide on, one bird will be at the bottom of the pecking order and another will be at the top.

Cold Weather

If you live in a cold climate (regularly gets below freezing during part or all of the year), there are certain breeds to avoid. In general, Standards are hardier than Bantams and heavier breeds fare better than lighter breeds. Combs and wattles also come into play: the smaller they are, the less susceptible they are to frostbite.



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Hot Summers

If you live any place that regularly gets over 100 degrees, you want to avoid the fat, fluffy and feather-footed breeds. Bantams do well in the summer (except the feather-footed varieties.)

These birds were developed in the Mediterranean; their large combs and close feathering help them handle the heat well.

Egg Production

Some breeds are valued mainly for meat, some for laying eggs, and others, called "dual purpose", for both. Still others are kept primarily for ornamental purposes, including all Bantams.

If you want the best possible egg production, limit your search to the laying breeds. Understand, however, that many people feel the best layers have a tendency to be more flighty and nervous and to avoid human contact. Our experience is to the contrary, but there are many people who would advise you otherwise. In contrast, dual-purpose and ornamental breeds are usually more docile and friendly. We have had some VERY friendly layers, and dual-purpose birds that didn't like contact with us at all, so this is just a generalisation. How friendly your birds are is in large part based on how accustomed they are to human contact and their individual personalities.

Egg Colour

You may be accustomed to seeing brown and white eggs at the shop, but some breeds lay blue eggs, others green, others deep chocolate brown, cream-colored and almost everything in between! We adore the variety of colours we get from our flock.

[Want more information on chicken eggs? – Click Here](#)

Save a Rare Breed

In today's homogenous world of agro-farming, just a few breeds of chicken are produced en masse and the continuance of hundreds of other "heritage" breeds ultimately depends on small farmers and backyard flock owners like us! Consider raising heritage breeds for your own flock.

[Want more information on chicken eggs? – Click Here](#)

To Chick or Not to Chick?

An important choice is whether to start with baby chicks or "started pullets": hens that have just started laying.



We love starting with baby chicks. They're too cute to pass up! But there are drawbacks: they require much more tender loving care than full-grown hens and it'll take 4-5 months before they start laying. Plus, they can be difficult to come by in small quantities. The large hatcheries ship a minimum of 25 at a time, so if you only want a few you'll have to find other people to split your order with. However, our minimum is 3-10, depending on your location and the types of birds you're ordering!

Your other alternative is to purchase from a garden or farm supply shop. Some carry baby chicks in the spring and you can purchase as many or as few as your want. But these shops can be difficult to find and have limited selection - so if you want a fancy or rare breed you may be out of luck.

IMPORTANT:

Finally, be sure to purchase "sexed" female chicks as opposed to "straight run" (mixed male and female), otherwise you will end up with cockerels - lots of them!

Which leads right into...

Cock-A-Doodle-Do!

Thinking about keeping a cockerel? We don't recommend it for first-time flock owners... at least not to start! Contrary to popular belief, cockerels are not needed for hens to lay eggs. Plus, they are *loud* and may cause a problem with the public and neighbours. Many people think cockerels just crow in the morning. Consider that myth busted! They crow throughout the day. That said, they are GORGEOUS and do help protect hens against predators. Once you have experience with hens, neighbours, you'll be in a better position to give one a try.



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Where To Get Chickens

Baby chicks can be purchased at a bird hatchery, garden or farm supply shop. Grown chickens you can obtain either at a hatchery or a local farm near you or even us. However we do not sell chicks, only chickens...please contact us for more information and we will discuss your needs:

info@poultrysheds.co.uk or 0191 383 1999.

Caring for Baby Chicks

Just like puppies, baby chicks are unbelievably adorable and loveable. And just like puppies, they're a handful! That said, we totally recommend it for anyone looking for a "pet" flock. This section covers all the basics of baby chick care.

As mentioned in the last section, baby chicks can be purchased at a poultry hatchery or garden/farm supply shop. (If you need help deciding on the breed, please go to our chicken breed section in our site)

Chicken Breeds (Click Through)

Clearing Your Schedule

Baby chicks require constant care and monitoring, so make sure your schedule is clear for the first 4 weeks! Don't plan on holidays or even day trips unless you have a seasoned baby chick pro on standby. Make sure you or a member of your family are available to check on them *at least* 5 times a day.

Deciding Where They're Going to Live

You can keep young chicks almost anywhere: their small size makes them easy to handle! They grow quickly, though, and by the time they're three or four weeks old they'll be taking up a lot of space and making a big mess, so preparing a living space for them is actually quite important. (The good news is that you can transfer them to their outside coop at 4-5 weeks of age, so you won't have to deal with the mess for too long... More on that below.)

Ideally for raising chicks you'll have a garage, workshop, cellar/basement or another predator-proof and draft-proof environment that's not in your main living space. Why not the main living space? Baby chicks, just like grown chickens, love to "scratch" their bedding materials, which creates a very fine dust that gets everywhere. The older they get, the more dust they make. Baby chicks also have a smell... It's not decidedly bad, nor do we find it overwhelming, but you may not want it in your house.

If you don't have a garage, workshop or basement in which to keep them, pick the next best option. Do you have porch/conservatory where it won't get too cold? A spare bedroom whose surfaces you can cover? If none of the above, does your kitchen have an area not too close to prep surfaces that you're willing to sacrifice for a few weeks? Choose the best possible option keeping in mind that wherever you keep them, they must be safe from predators and drafts.

Creating a Suitable Living Environment

This is the one of the most important part of raising happy, healthy chicks.

The baby chick house (also known as the "brooder")

Baby chicks need to be protected from drafts but still have adequate ventilation. This can be in the form of a cardboard box with holes for ventilation, a single-faced corrugated cardboard roll, 12" or higher, a large plastic storage bin, or even a kiddie pool! All of the above have been used with success.

Whatever housing solution you go with, make sure it provides 2 square feet per chick. It sounds like an awful lot, but as they get older (and bigger) you'll realize why this is necessary.



A heat source

Baby chicks need to be kept pretty hot. Think sauna! The first week of their lives they require an air temperature of 95 degrees, the second week 90 degrees, and so on - going down by 5 degrees per week until they're ready to transition to "outside". A 250-watt infrared heat lamp is the best way to achieve this, placed right in the middle of their living area and suspended off the ground. The height of the light will depend on what it takes to achieve your target temperature.



We recommend a red heat bulb for a few reasons: one, with a bright white light constantly glaring it can be hard for them to sleep. The red light is darker and provides them some respite. Two, red lights help

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prevent them from pecking one another. These lamps and bulbs can be bought from any good DIY store.

Pay close attention to how your chicks behave. If they're all crowded together directly under the heat source, they're cold. Lower the heat lamp or add another one. If they're around the edges of the brooder, avoiding the heat and each other like the plague, they're too hot! Raise the heat lamp. A happy flock will happily be exploring all around the brooder.

And please do not listen to anyone that tells you a regular old 60 watt bulb will suffice! We've seen chicks die from this bad advice. They really need a lamp intended to produce heat, and as we've mentioned, we recommend the 250-watt variety.

Absorbent bedding

Baby chicks are big poopers, so make sure to line the floor of their housing unit with an absorbent material. The best, we think, is to spread wood shavings about 1" thick. Resist the urge to use newspaper! It's not nearly as absorbent and the slippery surface can lead to a permanent deformity called "splayed leg" which can ultimately result in the other chickens pecking on the affected bird to death. Many people also swear by paper towels, changed often. Wood chips again can be bought from any good DIY store or garden centre.

[We do however sell bags of wood chips in our Feed and Feed Supplies Section – Click Here](#)



A drinker/waterer

We recommend you don't try to use a dish, a rabbit drinker, or anything you have just "laying around". Baby chicks have special needs when it comes to water. Dishes can make it easy for chicks to drown, and they'll certainly do naughty things like walk in it, spill it, kick their bedding materials into it, and poop in it -- meaning you'll have to change it constantly. Rabbit drinkers aren't preferable, either, because not enough chicks can access it at once. For the best results, we recommend you use a chick waterer. They come in a number of different sizes and shapes, all basically sufficient.



Keep in mind that even with the best drinker, they'll still kick bedding materials into it and find ways to poop in it from time to time. Raising the waterer off the ground somewhat will help (starting their second week of life), but no matter what they're going to get that water messy, so change it a few times a day.

[We do sell drinkers in our Feed and Feed Supplies Section – Click Here](#)

A feeder

Once again, we recommend you resist the temptation to use a dish or bowl for feeding your chicks. They're messy, and they'll jump in and kick the feed all over the place, poop in it, and in the worse case scenario: they'll tip it over and trap a baby underneath. (This has happened!) Spend those few extra pounds and buy a "real" baby chick feeder, or borrow one from a friend. They come in many shapes and sizes so you have choice.





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We do sell drinkers in our Feed and Feed Supplies Section – (click Through)

Bonus: Roosting Poles

Chickens love to roost on poles or branches when they're resting. You don't HAVE to provide your brood roosting poles, but they'll be even happier if you do. We like half inch diameter wooden dowels. Try them about 5 inches off the ground. (They may like it so much they won't roost on top of your feeder and waterer!). Our poultry sheds have roosting poles built in...so your chickens will be pleased as punch!



[To view our chicken coops and poultry sheds go to: www.poultrysheds.co.uk](http://www.poultrysheds.co.uk)



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Feed

Fortunately this one doesn't require much thought! Suppliers have formulated special feed complete with everything baby chicks need. It's called "starter feed" and comes in either "crumbles" or "mash" (referring to how ground down it is). Either is fine. The only thing to know is that if you've had your chicks vaccinated against Coccidiosis, they'll need an un-medicated feed. If not, or if you've only had them vaccinated for Marek's Disease, medicated feed is a great way to keep them healthy those first few months. Again this type of feed is available in any good pet store/farm shop. Speak to the person you are buying the chicks from regarding the vaccinations Anyone who is selling the chicks and who really cares for the chicks will make sure the relevant vaccinations have been induced before you get the chicks home.

A question we commonly get is how long to feed baby chicks "starter feed" for before switching to a feed called "grower" or "chick grower". The answer is: it all depends! Each manufacturer formulates their feed differently, so read the label and follow their instructions. Some only recommend the starter for 4 weeks before moving onto grower; some combine both together in a "starter/grower" feed that can last up to 16 weeks, etc.

Customers also will ask us whether they can feed their chicks scraps, or worms and other bugs from the garden... Small amounts of vegetable/dairy should be fine for the chicks (and they'll love it!), and the same goes with bugs and worms. But consider those like dessert, not the main course. Starter feeds contain everything chicks need to survive and thrive, and filling them up with too much of the "other stuff" can throw off their nutritional balance.

Finally, people want to know how much food they should give their birds. The answer is: as much as they want! Don't ration it. Give your birds 24/7 access to all the food they can eat. They're not like dogs. They'll self-regulate.

[We do sell Starter Feed and Chick Grower Feed in our Feed and Feed Supplies Section – Click Here](#)

Grit

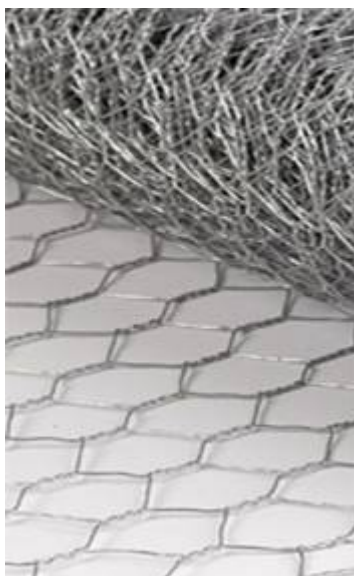
Ever heard the saying "scarce as a hen's teeth"? That's right, chickens don't have them! Instead they eat tiny pebbles and store them in their "crop". When the food enters their crop, the pebbles grind it up to make digestion easier. For baby chicks, sand, parakeet gravel or canary gravel, available at your local pet store or grocery store pet aisle, will suffice. You can either sprinkle this in their feed or provide it in a small cup or bowl.



[We do sell Grit in our Feed and Feed Supplies Section – Click Here](#)

Netting for the top

Although most grown chickens are pretty pathetic flyers, young chicks are much more capable. If your brooder is only 12 inches high, don't be surprised if you find your week-old chicks perching on top of it! To prevent this, we recommend you cut a section of deer netting or chicken wire just big enough to drape over your brooder, or use a 2-foot-high brooder box to increase the length of time before they're able to "fly the coop". This type of netting is available from any good DIY store.



A note for parents ordering chicks

Since baby chicks do die from time to time in shipping, we recommend that if you've got young children you A) Do not tell them when the chicks are coming, B) Do not tell them how many chicks you've ordered, and C) Do not have them with you when you inspect the box for the first time. This way if there are any losses, you can deal with them without the kids ever being the wiser. Losses are not common, but when they do happen they can be devastating to little ones.

Important health notes

Pasting Up

As you move your baby chicks from their shipping box into their brooder kit (which you've set up and heated in advance, of course!), check them for "pasting up", a condition in which their droppings cake up and block their vent opening, preventing them from passing any more droppings. This problem will be pretty obvious; you won't have to go poking around their insides to see it. The dried pooh will be stuck to their outside, totally or partially covering their vent. *This is a deadly condition and must be resolved with immediately.* We recommend you apply a warm, wet paper towel to their rears and then use a toothpick to clear the blockage. In especially bad cases you may have to dunk the chick's rear in warm water before it will loosen up enough to remove it. Your chick will complain, loudly, but stand fast in your determination knowing that the chick will die if you don't! Then, dry the chick off with a blow dryer and immediately return her to the brooder kit with the others. And keep checking the birds that presented with this problem, for it often returns throughout the first week.



Immediate access to water

Your new brood will need water right away. Watch them carefully once you've transferred them to their new home. If they aren't finding the water, pick an especially spritely one and gently put its beak into the water. This should be enough to teach them - once one chick's drinking the others are sure to follow! The same goes with the food: make sure they're finding it. If not, show them. Resist the temptation to feed your chicks water with a syringe. This can cause death by drowning, even if you're very careful about it. Just gently dip their beaks in water. If one is still not drinking, chances are it is struggling to stay alive and may not make it.



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Ongoing Chick Care

Keep checking up on your chicks several times a day. They'll be doing naughty things like kicking up their bedding into the feed and water, and you'll have to clean up after them. (Don't forget, they need round-the-clock access to all the food and water they can get their beaks on!) Also pay close attention to their behaviour. We said it before and we'll say it again because it's key: If they're crowded together directly under the heat source, they're cold. Lower the heat lamp or add another one. If they're around the edges of the brooder avoiding the heat and each other like the plague, they're too hot! Raise the heat lamp. Not getting this right can be the death of young chicks.

Changing Bedding

For sanitary purposes and to keep their area from stinking, change their bedding at least once a week. We throw ours in the compost pile where it's happily turned into rich earth.

Heating over time

Don't forget that your baby chicks need less and less heat as time goes by. By their 2nd week the heat can be reduced 5 degrees to 90, by the 3rd week by another 5 degrees to 85 and so on. However, this is just a guideline. Continue tuning into their behavioural cues as described above and you'll know how to tweak their heat. Also, keep in mind that some of your chicks will develop faster than others, requiring less heat, while the "runty" ones will want to be closer to the heat lamp. Make sure your heating set-up gives each chick the choice of how much heat is comfortable to them (in other words, don't create a uniform temperature by putting the heat lamp inside the box and then covering the box!)

Dealing with kids & chicks

If you've got kids or you're planning on bringing kids over to see the chicks, set the boundaries up front. Chicks are irresistibly sweet and cheeky kids tend to harass them. Make sure you watch the chicks; if they show signs of distress, be firm and return them to their brooder. Also, if you have chicks are or were recently pasted up, please instruct your kids to let them be. Over-handling can prevent a chick that's "on the edge" from bouncing back (it can be the death of them!).

Growing... and growing!

As your chicks get older you'll understand why we recommended a minimum of 2 square feet of living space per bird. If you provided them less than that and your older chicks are picking at one another, do expand their living quarters. Both you and the chicks will be much less stressed. And as mentioned above, if they start flying on top of their brooder box, a simple length of deer netting or chicken wire laid on top of their living quarters should prevent it!

"Outside" time

After the chicks are 2-3 weeks old, if it's warm outside (65-70 degrees at least) and sunny, feel free to let them have a little "outdoor time"! Put them in a wire cage or erect some other temporary housing and place it in the sun, making sure they have access to water and shade if they need it. They'll absolutely love digging around in the grass. But don't leave them unattended! At this age they're VERY good at flying and VERY susceptible to predators. Plus, if it's windy they'll get cold (and they'll let you know they're unhappy with their loud chirping).

By 4-5 weeks of age your chickens are ready to move outside full-time. And thank goodness! As much as you love them, you'll be thrilled to get them out of your house. Read the next chapters to learn about chicken coop requirements, how to transition them to their coop and how to care for them as they get older. Also, keep in mind that if you're purchasing a chicken coop it can take three or more weeks to



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arrive, so you may want to have that squared away before you get the chicks!

Baby Chick FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)

Q: Can I combine different breeds in a flock, or will they not get along?

A: Go ahead and combine! No matter what combo of birds you get -- whether it's 25 of the same breed or one each of five different breeds -- one bird will be at the top of the pecking order and one will be at the bottom. This is true whether you get aggressive birds or really docile birds. You'll have a "head honcho" that "rules the roost" and a "wallflower" that stays out of the fray for fear she'll get picked on by the others. Also, even if you order purely docile breeds, you could have one with a wacky personality that picks on all the others, or vice versa a reputedly "flighty" breed could end up being your biggest sweetheart! In other words, each bird has their own, unique personality. So don't worry too much about managing your flock. Just go with what you like!

Q: Can I combine bantams and large fowl (standard) birds together?

A: See above. Same goes here!

Q: How much food should I give my baby chicks?

A: As much as they want! We talked about this a little above, but in case you didn't catch it, chickens aren't like dogs -- they won't eat themselves to death. They'll only eat as much as they need. So go on, spoil them! Give them as much food as you can fit in your feeder. They won't overdo it.

Q: Is "pasting up" REALLY a deadly condition?

A: You bet it is! "Pasting up" is described above: it's when droppings cake up and block a baby chick's vent opening, preventing them from passing any more droppings, and it must be dealt with immediately. Apply a warm, wet paper towel to their rears and then use a toothpick to *gently* clear the blockage, or in severe cases dunk the chick's rear in warm water so it softens up enough to remove it. Dry her off and return her to the brooder kit with the other chicks, and keep an eye on her in the coming days to make sure the problem doesn't return.

Chicken Coop Requirements

A hen's coop is her castle! Proper housing is the key to happy, healthy birds, but building a chicken coop to the proper specifications is not as simple as it might seem. We have been building chicken coops/poultry sheds for over 50 and we would like to think we know a fair bit about building suitable chicken coops and poultry sheds...so you are in safe hands!



[To view our chicken coops and poultry sheds go to: www.poultrysheds.co.uk](http://www.poultrysheds.co.uk)

- Our designs are predator-proof, not just from the sides, but from above and below as well. Predators that would love chicken wings for dinner include but are not limited to foxes and hawks.
- Our designs are secure from nasty rodents (yes, rats!) that will be attracted to the feed and droppings. Rodents are burrowing creatures, so you need to block them from slipping into the coop from below. If your coop doesn't have a floor, you need to bury small-mesh fencing down into the ground about 12" all around the coop. All our chicken coops and poultry sheds have floors so providing maximum protection against hungry rodents.
- Our designs are breezy enough to prevent respiratory diseases, to which chickens are especially prone, but not so drafty during winter that they freeze their tushes off. Chickens can withstand the cold so long as it's not drafty!
- Our chicken coops and poultry sheds are easy to clean so bugs and bacteria don't fester. See our



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Hints and Tips section in our website for full details – **Click Through**

- Our designs provide "roosting poles" for your girls to sleep on (2" wide; rounded edges; allot 10" of space per bird side to side and 10" between poles if more than one is necessary; plus ladder-like grading so the pole furthest away is several inches higher than the closest).
- Our designs encourage egg-laying with 1 nest box for every four or five chickens. Nest boxes should be raised off the ground at least a few inches, but lower than the lowest roosting pole. They should also be dark and "out of the way" to cater to the hen's instinct to lay her eggs in a safe, place.
- Our designs are roomy: at least 4 square feet per bird if birds are able to roam freely during the day, and at least 10 square feet per bird if they are permanently confined.
- Our designs can accommodate a feeder and waterer, which should hang 6-8" off the ground.
- Our designs include a removable "droppings tray" under roosting poles for capture and easy disposal of droppings. (Or should we say for easy access to your lawn fertilizer?)
- Similar to the coop, the sides of the attached chicken run, if you have one, should be tethered into the soil to keep predators and rodents from digging their way in. Once again, we recommend chicken wire fencing or half-inch hardware cloth. It's also our strong recommendation that you secure the top of the run with aviary netting or deer netting. This will keep wild birds (which can carry communicable diseases) out and provide further defence against sly predators.

Getting geared up

In this section we'll fill you in on the supplies you'll need and what to do just before your chickens arrive home or, if you have baby chicks, before they make their transition to "outside".

Items You'll Need to Purchase

Feeder and Waterer

The best feeders and waterers (water containers) hang or are suspended off the ground, prevent chickens from jumping on top of them and contaminating the contents with feces. They also automatically refill so you can go away for a few days and not have to worry. These run in the range of £5 - £20 each and **we sell them (click through)** at very competitive prices.

Food

It's easiest to purchase "complete" feeds that have exactly the right mix of vitamins, minerals, proteins, carbohydrates and fat. Feeds come in both organic and conventional varieties, can be purchased at a garden supply store or at **our shop (click through)** and should run you £5.00.00 - £15.00.00 per 50 lb bag depending on your location and the variety chosen.

If your chickens have started laying eggs or are 20 weeks or older, purchase a complete "layer" feed. If they're younger than that, you'll need a complete "starter" feed. We sell organic "complete" layer feed on our site from £20 per 50 lb bag, including shipping. **See our shop here. (Click through)**



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Scratch

Many people also purchase "scratch" for their birds. If you want to see a chicken go bonkers, give it some scratch! It's a mix of grains including corn, wheat, oats and rye, among others. Unlike your complete feed which should be kept in a feeder for around the clock access, scratch is usually thrown on the ground for the chickens to peck at. It should be a special treat - not a staple of their diet - because it doesn't include all the nutrients they need. Your girls will let you know if you're giving them too much. Their eggshells will become weak and susceptible to breakage. [You can buy scratch here – Click.](#)

Grit

Ever heard of the saying "rarer than a hen's teeth"? That's right: chickens don't have teeth! Grit takes their place. It consists of small rocks that chickens store in their "crop", which is where they break down food before it enters their stomach. Keep a small container of grit accessible to your chickens or mix a small amount in with their food. [We do sell Grit in our Feed and Feed Supplies Section – Click Here.](#)

Bedding

Bedding is an important part of keeping your chickens happy and healthy. On the coop floor the bedding will provide a soft surface for your chickens to walk on and will absorb droppings and odour. You want your coop sanitary and sweet-smelling, don't you? In the nest, bedding will give freshly-laid eggs a soft landing so they don't crack. (A cracked egg is a spoiled egg.) Wood shavings cost £5.00.00-£10.00 per 50 pound bag. [We do sell Bedding in our Feed and Feed Supplies Section – Click Here.](#)

There are many bedding materials to choose from, and we think the best is wood shavings (not to be confused with wood chips). Other materials are either less absorbent or more likely to become infested. Bedding should be at least 2" thick.

Dust Baths

Chickens love to take dust baths! They dig a shallow hole, loosen up all the dirt, and proceed to get themselves absolutely as dirty as they possibly can. (Don't worry, they shake the dirt off later...) Dust baths are absolutely necessary: they prevent parasites such as mites and lice from finding a home in your chickens' feathers and legs.

If your chickens aren't free-range or their run area doesn't have a dry patch of ground where they can dig a hole, you'll need to provide them with an artificial dust bath. Place a box on the floor of their coop and fill it with 6" of a dusting powder, which can part fireplace/bbq ashes, part soil dust, part sand and diatomaceous earth – insect powder if required, which can be purchased from any good pet store.



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Just Before You Move them

If you're buying adult chickens or transitioning your adolescent chicks to their outdoor coop, make these preparations in advance to ensure a smooth transition:

Set up your chicken coop or poultry shed, (which I hope you have bought from us!), complete with roosting pole(s), a nesting area and bedding 2" to 3" thick. Fill the feeder and waterer and make sure they're 6" to 8" off the ground. Their run area, if applicable, should be attached and secured. We also recommend you have your vet's phone number handy just in case any problems arise.

On the big day, teach your girls where "home" is by confining them to their coop for two full days. After that, if let out to forage they will always return home. The saying "chickens come home to roost" is really true! You'll never need to worry about them getting lost.

Caring for Grown Chickens

Caring for pet chickens is pretty easy! They have the same needs as most any other pet. In this section we'll fill you in on daily, monthly, semi-annual and annual chores, as well as other nuances of chicken husbandry.

• What to Do on a Daily Basis

- Keep feeders and waterers full.
- Make sure the waterer is clean. Chickens will be less inclined to drink dirty water, and a dehydrated bird can *very quickly* become ill or die.
- Check to make sure they all look active, bright and healthy. Make an appointment with your vet if they don't.
- Collect and refrigerate eggs, pointy side down for maximum freshness.
- If you've opened the coop door to let your chickens out, always be sure to close and secure it at dusk (once they've all returned!) to make sure predators can't get in. (Tip: if you have a mobile phone that allows you to set a recurring alarm, try that as a reminder.)

Keep in mind that you CAN leave your chickens alone for a few days provided they have enough food, water and space for the duration of your trip. The eggs they'll have laid in your absence should still be good to eat. Fresh eggs keep for several days without refrigeration. Surprised? Consider this: hens lay an average of 10-12 eggs per "clutch" (the group of eggs that a hen sits on to incubate). They lay one egg per day and at the end of a 10-12 day laying period they roll all the eggs together to incubate them. That means the egg laid on day 1 is still good enough on day 12 to become a living, breathing baby chick - so it should be good enough for you to eat too!

Egg Tip: Your eggs may have some slight traces of dirt or chicken feces on them. Resist the urge to scrub them clean! Outside the egg is a delicate membrane called the "bloom" that wards off bacteria and other foreign matter. Scrubbing will damage this membrane. If you're one of those Type A people that needs perfect-looking eggs, rub them with your fingers *very gently* under warm water. Then, wash your hands



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thoroughly.

• **What to Do on a Monthly Basis**

- Change the bedding in the coop and the nest. This is necessary for sanitary purposes. Excessive ammonia build up is dangerous to poultry and can cause respiratory illness.
- Remove the faeces. We put ours in the compost bin or use it as fertilizer.

What to Do on a Bi-annual Basis

Twice a year you've got to really scrub your coop clean! Remove bedding, nest materials, feed and water containers. For a cleaner, we recommend a concoction of 1 part bleach, 1 part dish soap, 10 parts water. A strong citrus cleanser will also do the trick. After cleaning, rinse well and let dry before replacing with fresh bedding. Do the same with the feed and water containers: clean thoroughly and rinse well, and replace with a fresh supply. You should be able to do this all in a couple hours!

Foods Chickens Shouldn't Eat

As mentioned previously, one of the great benefits of having chickens is they take care of your unwanted leftovers! There are a few foods they shouldn't eat, though (and thanks to our customers for helping us beef up this list over the years!):

- Citrus fruits and peels.
- Bones
- Any large serving of meat, or meat that has gone bad
- Garlic and onion (unless you want your eggs tasting like them)
- Avocados
- Raw potatoes
- Chocolate (as if you'd give that up!)

Also, we hear from chicken pros that Morning Glories and Daffodils are poisonous to chickens, and even though chickens will generally know to avoid them, you might just want to keep an eye on them around these plants.



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How to Handle Chickens

Handling chickens is an art, and practice makes perfect! The key is finding the balance between being gentle and letting them know that no matter how much they wriggle or squirm, they're not getting away.

First, put your dominant hand (the hand you write with) on the middle of their back. If you're new to chickens, it's helpful to secure their wings as much as possible with your thumb and forefinger. (Pros don't need to secure their wings at all!) Your other hand will need to take their legs out of the equation. Secure one leg between your thumb and forefinger, and the other between the forefinger and middle finger of the same hand. Then lift them, supporting the lower portion of their body with the heel of your hand and wrist. Your dominant hand should still be on their back. Once you've got them up, holding them close to your body will prevent further wriggling. And again, as you get better at this you won't need that hand on their backs!

Winter Precautions

If you have cold winters, you shouldn't run into any problems provided you choose the right breed. Our customers want to do the very best they can for their flock, and we often get asked whether they should heat their coop during winter. Our feeling is this isn't a good idea. Chickens adapt to the cold weather over time. Their body metabolism actually changes along with the seasons. When you heat your coop, the birds will never get used to the colder outside temperature -- so if the heat were to accidentally cut out causing a sudden change in temperature, you could literally lose your entire flock overnight. We've seen it happen.

That said, if you live in a really cold climate there are a few precautions you can take to make everyone's lives easier (by which we mean you and your birds!):

- Protect combs and wattles from frostbite by rubbing on petroleum jelly or another heavy moisturizer every few days.
- Make sure the water supply does not freeze! This is very important. Chickens cannot live long without fresh water. If you don't have electricity in your coop and therefore cannot provide a water heater, we recommend you bring the waterer into your house every night, and return it outside every morning. Check the water once or twice a day to make sure it's not frozen.

Summer Precautions

Excessive heat is a real risk to birds. Make sure they have access to fresh, clean water at all times. Provide them a source of shade outside and as much ventilation as possible inside.

Note: Your hens may lay fewer eggs during heat waves. This is a sign of stress, but laying rates will return to normal once the heat has receded.



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Fertilizers & "Turf Builders": Are They Safe?

Heck no! If your birds are free-ranging on your lawn, abstain from applying fertilizers or "turf builders". These products very often contain pesticides, herbicides and other harsh, nasty chemicals. Not only can these cause illness in your birds, but you don't want to be eating eggs containing these materials. Part of the benefit of keeping chickens is the comfort of knowing that those fabulous, fresh, delicious eggs are safe for you and your family. Fertilizers and turf builders negate all that. That said, we understand the pressures of suburban life: if you can't be the only person in the area with dandelions and various other weeds, we recommend you use organic fertilizers in the front garden and limit your birds to the back.

What to Do if Your Chickens Get Sick

Most chicken illnesses are curable if they're caught in time! If you suspect one of your chickens may be under the weather, take the precautionary measure of isolating it from the rest of the flock. This will help prevent illness from spreading. (And of course, make sure the isolated chicken has access to food and water!)

Second, make an appointment with your vet right away. You need to find one that specialises in Avian medicine or farm animals, and we recommend that you find the nearest one prior to getting chickens.

- The following symptoms indicate illness:
 - Mangy appearance
 - Visible mites
 - Abnormal stool, including blood, visible worms, diarrhea, droppings that are all white. (Normal stool is brown with a white cap.)
 - Sneezing
 - Loss of energy or depression
 - Sudden, drastic reduction in position in pecking order
 - Loss of appetite
 - Stunted growth
- A few things NOT to worry about:
 - Your chickens' first eggs will be pretty pathetic! They'll be small, shells will be weak and some won't even have shells at all. Don't worry! This is not a sign of sickness.
 - Your chickens will lose and re-grow their feathers once a year. This is called "molting" and is perfectly normal. They won't lay eggs during this time. (For more on this next.)
 - A tiny speck of blood in an egg. This is normal. Don't worry about it. If it becomes frequent, or if



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there is a significant amount of blood, that's another story.

Remember, the most important part of keeping your chickens healthy is disease prevention! Follow the care instructions and coop specifications above and you'll have a happy, healthy flock. However, as with any animal, there's still a chance of illness. Since you'll be checking on your birds daily, you'll catch the illness early and increase the chance of a positive outcome.

If you do decide to keep chickens, common sense should prevail. Thoroughly wash hands after contact, and wear gloves when dealing with their droppings. A healthy dose of hand sanitizer immediately after contact is a good idea too. We also set aside a pair of shoes that we use only for going out to the coop. This pair of shoes never gets worn inside, or for that matter, anywhere else. This prevents the spread of any faeces which may be on the bottom of our shoes.

What to expect the first year and beyond

Chickens change the most during the first year of life. They start out as adorable little fluff balls requiring constant care and monitoring. Within just 5 weeks they are ready to make the transition to "outside" (the coop that will become their full-time home) and a fairly self-sufficient life.

At 3-6 weeks old, they become mangy and diseased-looking as their fuzzy covering begins to shed and is slowly replaced with mature feathers. Their wattles and combs grow and turn a deeper red. Cockerels (young cockerels) make their first attempt at crowing. At 20-25 weeks old, pullets (young hens) lay their first eggs, which will be small and weak-shelled. Over time they will lay more frequently, the eggs will become larger and the shells harder. By 6 months, the pecking order, which governs who gets to pick on who, will be established and combs and wattles will be fully formed. What a busy six months!

After this tumultuous time, your chickens' world will slow down. Egg production will slowly but surely decline while egg size will get larger, at least through the second year. They'll continue to molt once per year, and once again they won't lay eggs during that time.

Other behavioural and physical issues to be aware of:

Broodiness

Your hens may go "broody" at any time in their life. This is when they stubbornly insist on sitting on eggs in order to hatch them into baby chicks. It doesn't matter if the eggs are fertilized or not; some hens will even go broody on golf balls or wooden eggs!

If you have a cockerel and want baby chicks, great! But if you don't have a cockerel, there are several reasons why you won't want broodiness. First, a broody hen gets grumpy when you try to collect the eggs from underneath her. She might even peck you, so beware! Second, because the eggs are not fertilized, the heat of your hen sitting on them will cause them to decompose at a faster rate - and you want to eat them, don't you? Third, a broody hen plucks out her own breast feathers to line the nest. Ouch! And all for nothing! Finally, a broody hen will just sit and sit on her nest, not eating or drinking as much as she normally would. This will weaken her and deprive her of much-needed nutrients.

To prevent this habit from forming, collect eggs every day. Hens are more likely to go broody on a nest full of eggs.

If a hen has ALREADY gone broody, there are several tactics you can use to break her of this habit. Start by repeatedly removing her from the nest. When some of our hens went broody, we'd remove her and



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carry her around for 10 minutes or so, twice a day. We had to do this for two days before she stopped. For birds that are more determined to be mummies, ice cubes or an ice pack in the nest will usually do the trick. In rare cases, more extreme measures are necessary! Another hen of ours, determinedly sat on and melted every ice cube we put under her for a whole week. In the end, we had to put her in "solitary" to break her! (With access to food and water, of course...) When she finally laid an egg again, we knew she was good to go back in the coop.

Molting

Once per year, every year, chickens will shed and re-grow some of their feathers. This process is called "molting". This usually happens in summer. During this time they may look a little ratty, and they definitely won't lay eggs. Not to worry. This isn't a sign of illness! The feathers will grow back and your bird will look better than ever.

(If, however, it takes a long time for the feathers to grow back, this could be a sign of parasites or other illness. You should be able to tell the difference because a sick bird behaves differently from the rest of the flock in other ways too. As always, if you're unsure, consult your vet.)



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Introducing new birds to the flock

We get questions about this all the time! Let there be no doubt: adding new birds to your pre-existing crew can be stressful, both to you and the birds. Your flock, peaceful because every hen knows her place in the pecking order, will be thrown all out of whack by the addition of newcomers. Every hen and roo will once again have to vie for his or her spot on the pecking order. At times it can seem like all-out war! The good news: it only lasts about a week, and there are a few things you can do to make it much easier on all of you.

The most important peace-making technique is to allow the birds to see one another, and even be in the same SPACE together, without having physical access to one another. This will allow them to work out the pecking order through subtler cues. If you have a run, you can achieve this by putting the new birds in the run with your old-timers but separating them with chicken wire, hardware cloth, or something else that'll do the same job. (Making sure, of course, that they all have access to food and water.) Do this for a week before introducing them to the flock.

After that first week, when you're ready to make the transition, we've heard that it's easiest to first introduce the new birds once they're all sleeping - the idea being that upon awakening your resident flock will notice the new guys but be too groggy and interested in eating to attack them right away. We're not sure about this because we haven't tried it, but heck... it's worth a try, right?

A few warfare-alleviating tactics we can say with certainty that reduce fighting all involve distraction. If your girls have nothing better to do they'll chase the poor newcomers and pick on them relentlessly. Distract them and you'll find they're much less mean. Tried and true distraction techniques include:

- Hanging a half a head of cabbage just out of reach so the chickens have to jump to get at it, an odd but miraculous solution;
- Adding large branches to the run and even inside the coop if possible, making pursuit more difficult and giving the newcomer(s) a place to hide;
- Adding dead leaves, grass clippings, pulled weeds and/or table scraps to their run, giving them plenty to dig through.

An even better distraction: letting them range freely! Your flock will be far too interested in the prospect of all the worms, pebbles, bugs and weeds they can get their beaks on to bother with one another. They won't go back in the coop until dusk, at which point they'll be settling in for a night's sleep and won't be so motivated to harass one another. (Though we don't recommend you do this until any newcomers have spent at least 2 days inside the coop, so they know it's "home" and to return there every night. Otherwise you may have a runaway bird on your hands!)



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Picking

Bare skin year round is concerning and is usually caused by chickens "picking" at one another. It's almost always the result of high stress levels. Many experts recommend you de-beak the birds (trim the pointy end of their beaks so they can't injure one another), but we don't: it cures the symptoms but not the underlying problem. Happy chickens don't pick one another! So figure out why they're not happy. Do they have sufficient space? Are there enough feed and water containers to go round? Enough nesting boxes? Could they have worms, lice or other parasites? Talk to your vet if you can't figure out. If you don't take care of the problem, you run the risk of escalation to the point of cannibalism (seriously).

Winter Egg Production

Due to fewer daylight hours in the winter, your chickens' egg production will decrease. If you wish for more eggs, provide your girls supplemental light during the otherwise dark morning and early evening hours.

Some people feel that reduced production during the winter provides your chickens with a much-needed vacation. They say it results in better laying in the spring. To our knowledge there is no data to support this claim.

Life span

How long chickens live is still a bit of a mystery! It's common for a hen to live 8-10 years, but we've heard one report of a chicken living 20 years. The older they get, of course, the fewer eggs they lay, but think of all their other valuable functions besides being a loved member of the family: tick-eating, mosquito-eating, and fly-eating, not to mention they're still fertilizer machines!

So... WELCOME TO THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF CHICKENS!

If you have read this far..I would say that you are the right type of person/family to keep chickens...well done!

We're so excited that you've made the decision to raise chickens. It's one of the most enjoyable, rewarding pastimes we can think of. Each of our girls has their own personality, and it has been a joy getting to know them all, not to mention the fabulous, flavoured, fresh eggs! We hope you enjoy your experience with chickens as much as we have.

If there's anything we've left out any questions left unanswered or stone left unturned please don't hesitate to ask us! We can always be reached at: <http://www.poultrysheds.co.uk>.

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Or if you'd prefer to speak with us then call us on 0191 383 1999.



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