



Exotic Animal Hospital of Philadelphia

Backyard Chicken Handout

Backyard chickens are a wonderful companion pet for the family and as an added benefit will provide you with eggs, fertilization, and some insect control for the backyard.

So you got a chicken, now what?

Where do I house my chicken?

Whether you are planning to buy or build a coop, there are a few features needed for safety, comfort, and wellbeing:

Coop size:

- The rule of thumb is about 2 to 3 square feet per chicken inside the chicken coop, and 8 to 10 square feet per chicken in an outside run

Bedding/substrate:

- Bedding in the chicken coop and run should be nontoxic, absorbent, quick-drying, compostable for future reuse and relatively inexpensive.
- The most popular material for inside the coop is wood shavings. Softwoods, such as pine, spruce or hemlock, wood shavings give off a nice aroma and are absorbent, binding with fecal matter. Chicken can also enjoy construction grade sand. Hens use it to dust-bathe and as a natural source of grit.
- The most important aspect in choosing bedding is cleanliness. Deep cleaning monthly is essential in disease prevention from bacteria and parasites.

Ventilation:

- Good ventilation removes ammonia and moist air from the coop all year long, as well as hot air in summer.
- This makes a healthier environment for the birds, decreases and prevents respiratory diseases and also extends the time between cleanouts by keeping the coop's air fresher.
- You may use 1/4-inch hardware mesh

Make sure it's not too drafty for winter months

Safety:

- Many predators will try to go after your chickens if they are not protected properly.
- Lock your coop at night
- Secure the coop from all sides including the bottom as some predators will attempt to dig in that way
- Your ventilation openings are likely covered in 1/4-inch hardware mesh, great. But how well is that mesh attached to the coop? If you tacked down the corners with nails or screws, you need more! use washers and screw these in every 2 inches

Enrichment:

- Foraging and digging are some of the main activities in chicken's lives so make sure to make their environment interesting.
- You may use whole vegetables to go through or hanging vegetables they need to slowly take down.
- Non-food toys are also great. You may buy or DIY:
 - Pet bird/kitten/baby toys like small balls, rattles, fake mice etc
 - Mirror- the unbreakable kind or even an old CD
 - Sand/dirt filled bin for dust bathing
 - Tunnel made of cardboard
 - Chicken swing using some rope and a large branch

Roosting Poles:

- A roost is a place where chickens can safely rest, either during the day or, more commonly, when they come into the coop at night to sleep.
- In the wild, chickens roost in trees. So to give them a happy experience, use wood.
- 2"-6" perches are best depending on the size of your chickens

Nesting:

Make sure to provide at least one nest box per 4 chickens for egg-laying.

Diet:

- When chickens are free ranging, they will forage for various bugs, including ticks, and graze on some grass. In captivity we need to try and match the nutritional requirements and account for egg production in laying hens.
- Feeding a good quality pelleted diet will ensure that the nutritional needs are met. Supplementation of calcium in the form of oyster shell is imperative in promoting healthy egg production and will decrease chances of calcium deficiencies.
- You may also offer leafy greens and other veggies along with an occasional mealworm treat
- Water should be available at all times and checked for freezing in the winter.

Preparing your coop for seasonal changes:

Winter:

Make sure to protect your chickens from harsh winter conditions such as high winds, freezing rain, snow etc.
A tarp can be used as an insulation layer
Heat lamps can pose a fire and burn hazard and are often not necessary

Summer:

Make sure your chickens do not overheat. At temperatures higher than 80°F chickens are at risk of heat stroke
Make sure to provide plenty of fresh water at all times
You may provide frozen fruit/vegetable treats along with some cool water in a shallow tub to stand in and cool off.

Chicken problems:

1. **Pododermatitis, or "bumblefoot", are sores on the bottom of their feet**
 - a. This can be caused due to unsanitary bedding/housing conditions or standing on hard surfaces for a long time
 - b. Make sure to check your chicken feet often for any swelling, sores, wounds
2. **Molting**

- a. Chickens will molt their feathers all at once - it is normal
 - b. However, random bald spots or feather loss over a long period of time can be a sign of a problem
3. **Marek's Disease**
- a. Young chicken disease caused by a herpesvirus
 - b. Prevention: a vaccine is given during the 18th day of incubation. (up to 3 days old)
 - c. Paralysis is a common sign of this disease
4. **New Castle's Disease:**
- a. Young chicken diseases caused by a virus
 - b. Infection by fecal-oral route or inhalation
 - c. Multi-system effects including the nervous system, respiratory system, and the digestive system.
 - d. Common symptoms may include: coughing, sneezing, diarrhea, tremors, or lameness.
5. **Reproductive Complications:**
- a. Very common issue in egg laying birds
 - b. Issues may be: passing soft egg shells, egg binding, egg peritonitis (broken egg within body), or reproductive tract tumors.
 - c. Prevention: appropriate diet with plenty calcium may prevent most of these issues
 - i. In some cases, there is a genetic or congenital (born with) component that will contribute to these complications
6. **Respiratory disease:**
- a. Common in coops that are not properly and often cleaned with inappropriate ventilation.
 - b. Common signs: sneezing, coughing, or difficulty breathing (open beak breathing or increased effort).

