

How to Care for Adult Chickens And Solve Common Problems

Small backyard flocks are usually healthy and easy to care for. Use the following guide lines to maintain your flock.

1. Buy healthy stock from reliable breeders, feed stores or hatcheries. Don't bring home chicks or adults with problems. Educate yourself first to know what to look for.
2. Provide good quality feed and clean water.
3. Provide a clean, dry, well ventilated shelter.
4. Provide enough space. The recommended amount is 3 – 3 ½ square feet (ft²) per large chicken. If possible 6 ft² per bird is better and will prevent a lot of problems.
5. Remove all dead birds and mice etc. Burn (take carcass to local veterinarian or humane shelter) or bury any carcasses. Don't let chickens eat any dead animals, they may be diseased.
6. Maintain biosecurity; don't visit from farm to farm and carry manure on your shoes. Change shoes and clothing and wash hands before you work with your own flock.
7. Disinfect all equipment on a routine schedule; especially if used by other flock owners or old and dirty.
8. Keep wild birds away.
9. Manage insects and rodents.
10. Avoid mixing birds of different ages, young birds have little immunity. If you have a mixed flock, do chores for young birds first.
11. Don't mix species; keep each species in separate quarters.
12. Medicate only when necessary.
13. Reduce stress where ever possible.

Common Problems

1. Predators – have a predator proof house and exercise area. Most backyard chickens are in enclosed spaces and not on pasture. The most common predators are coyotes, foxes, dogs (feral, your pets or your neighbors), bobcats, house cats, hawks, owls, snakes, rats, weasels, mink etc.

To manage predators – eliminate the point of entry or what is attracting the predator (i.e. pet or dog food left out, excess chicken feed left out). Put chickens in at night – every night! Use hardware cloth instead of poultry wire; it is much more secure. Bury perimeter wire for exercise area in a concrete filled 6" deep ditch to prevent digging

under by predators or bury hardware cloth 1 foot down and one foot out in an “L” shape to prevent digging under fence. If chickens are on pasture during the day, keep it mowed so there is no cover or keep them in moveable fencing (chicken tractors). An electrified fence also helps. Night Guard is a solar powered blinking red light that frightens off predators. If the predator must be eliminated, make sure that you have done everything you can do first to discourage the predator. You must follow applicable federal and state rules and regulations prior to eliminating a predator.

2. Cannibalism – chickens need to peck and be active. If they are kept in limited space and crowded they are more likely to attack birds that are sick, injured, bloody, etc. To prevent cannibalism: isolate any injured bird; provide more space and a variety of grains or treats that they have to scratch for; provide perches and dust baths. For chicks, use a red light to reduce visibility. Chicks do better on litter they can peck in rather than on wire. Light weight, high strung temperament breeds like Leghorns are more likely to pick on other birds than heavy weight calm breeds like American or Asiatic breeds.
3. Lice and Mites – check chickens routinely for lice and mites. Know what to look for. Dust birds if necessary. Provide dust baths. Keep houses and exercise areas clean. Prevention is much better than treatment.
4. Weather – exposure to long periods of extreme heat or cold will decrease egg production and increase stress. Chickens stress more in heat than cold; give plenty of water. Provide ventilation especially for heat. Chickens can die at 104°F. In winter provide heat if water containers start to freeze. Eliminate drafts. Provide perches away from windows. To prevent frostbite, provide wide perches so birds can cover their toes.
5. Trim toe nails and beaks if needed. Rough ground keeps these short. Birds always on bedding can't trim by themselves.

Characterisitics of Healthy Birds

1. Appearance – look perky and alert, have bright eyes, shiny feathers, good color on combs and wattles.
2. Activity – healthy birds are active.
3. Sound – clucking and verbalizing is normal.
4. Production – decline in eggs, thin shells or miss-shaped eggs might indicate disease.
5. Weight – be aware if weight loss occurs.
6. Odor – healthy flocks have a certain odor. Learn what this is. Respiratory and intestinal diseases smell different.
7. Droppings – can become smelly, bloody or watery if birds are sick.