

Common Chicken Ailments

The best advice is to consult your vet if you think your chicken may be ill.

A sick bird may look depressed, hunched up with feathers fluffed out and the head carried low or tucked under the wing.

Bumble Foot: This occurs when a wound under the foot heals but pus remains underneath. Watch out for any limping birds and make sure there are no sharp stones in the run. Consult a vet.

Red Mite: These parasites hide in crevices in the chicken-house, emerging at night to feed on the roosting hens. Birds become anaemic and emaciated. A warning sign is if birds are reluctant to go inside, another is if small drops of blood are spotted. The house must be cleaned thoroughly and sprayed with an anti-mite product.

Scaly Leg: This is a condition caused by mites burrowing into the skin between the scales of the legs. It produces white crusts which distort the leg scales and is extremely infectious. Clean the house, move the birds onto fresh ground and consult a vet.

Impacted Crop: Symptoms include hens with no appetite, who look miserable and whose crop feels solid. It is caused by ingestion of unsuitable material such as long stalks of grass. It can be treated by trickling a teaspoon of olive oil into the beak and massaging the crop area gently to move the obstruction. Ensure the birds have access to a supply of grit and consult a vet.

Worms: Chickens are susceptible to infestation by worms. Symptoms can include a reduction in the rate of egg-laying, an increase in hunger, and sometimes diarrhoea. If you suspect your chickens have worms, consult a vet for the appropriate medication. If left untreated it can prove fatal.



Chicken Facts

Today's domesticated chickens originate from Asia, from where they spread throughout the ancient world. The domestication of these wild jungle fowl is thought to go back at least 8,000 years.

An intact male is called a rooster, or a cockerel if under the age of one year, and a castrated male is called a capon. The females are called hens, or pullets if aged under one year.

Chickens lay eggs in a variety of colours from white to dark brown and also pale greens and blues.

Life span:
10 to 15 years

Weight:
1.5 to 3.5 kg

Maturity:
18 to 24 weeks

Hatching:
Takes up to 28 days

Average number of eggs:
1 to 5 per week

Breeding Life:
1 to 2 years

The Environmental Animal Sanctuary & Education (EASE) is a registered charity (no. 1089160) which promotes aspects of the human/companion animal relationship. Our services include pet fostering, pet bereavement support and providing education in animal welfare. For more information about our work, contact:

EASE
PO Box 292
Hatfield
Hertfordshire AL9 6ZJ
Phone: 01707 261028
Fax: 01707 258716
Email: info@ease-animals.org.uk
Website: www.ease-animals.org.uk

Cartoons by
landers
www.landerson.co.uk
cartoons@landers.co.uk



**Environmental
Animal Sanctuary
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The EASE Guide to Caring for CHICKENS



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Chickens make interesting pets. There are a wide range of breeds available, they are easy to look after and prices start from a few pounds each. However, they need daily attention and may require veterinary treatment, which must be borne in mind before deciding to keep them.

A Home for your Chicken

The chicken-house should be bought and set up before buying any chickens, and there are several options available for housing so take the time to decide which is the best option. The house should provide a minimum space of 2 square metres for 10 birds but this will depend upon the size of the chickens. A lockable door or pop-hole is essential to keep out predators such as foxes and cats. Ventilation is important to provide fresh air while preventing draughts, and a run is also required which will need to be moved regularly to fresh areas of grass; this can be partially covered to give some shelter from the weather.

The house will need roosting bars — perches raised a few inches or more above the floor — where the chickens will sleep. Allow 20-30cm length of bar per bird, depending on their size, and the bars should be 4-5cm wide with slightly rounded edges for ease of grip. A removable board below the roosting bars will make cleaning easier.

Hens will need several nesting boxes in which to lay eggs — these can either be compartments at ground level or boxes attached to the inside of the chicken-house above ground level, filled to 1/3 with wood-shavings. They should be easily accessible to allow the removal of the eggs.

Cover the floor of the chicken-house with wood-shavings for ease of cleaning and for the birds to scratch and forage in. The house should be cleaned thoroughly at least every week. A secure area allowing the chickens room to roam around and forage needs to be provided. Items such as plastic flower pots, dust baths and perches arranged at different levels can be included in the run.

When introducing new chickens to their house it is best to confine them inside for 24 hours with food and water, so that they accept it as home.

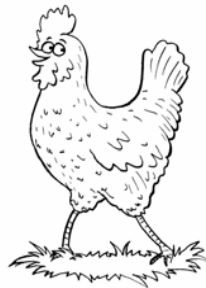


Food and Drink for your Chicken

There are a variety of commercially-prepared foods available which provide all of the nutrients that chickens need; this is best provided in a feeder allowing the birds to help themselves. Fresh food including sweet corn, lettuce and parsley will also be appreciated, as will grains such as wheat and corn. Chickens spend much of their time scratching and pecking for food so scatter the fresh food on the ground to allow them to forage; otherwise they can become bored and develop bad habits such as feather pecking. For a treat, buy some mealworms which are available from fishing shops and sprinkle them over the ground for your chickens.

Fresh water should always be available in a drinker raised above ground level on bricks or suspended to prevent the chickens scratching soil and dirt into it. This needs to be checked regularly in winter in case it freezes up.

Grit to aid digestion and crushed oyster shell to provide calcium used in the production of the egg shell also need to be given in a separate container. All feeders, drinkers and dishes must be cleaned thoroughly each week.



Handling your Chickens

To pick up a chicken encircle its body with your hands, holding the wings down while supporting the body from below. Picking it up with its head towards your body reduces the possibility of getting covered in droppings from a nervous bird! The chicken may then be carried by placing it under one arm gently to prevent it extending and flapping its wings.

Roosters have large spurs or claws which can inflict serious injuries so they must be handled with extra care.

Chickens

Chickens are social animals that develop a 'pecking order', with the dominant birds controlling movement, feeding and socialisation of those less dominant. They are docile and generally easy to handle and care for, while not being as fragile as other species of fowl.

There is a wide variety of breeds available in a range of colours and patterning, some of which are very expensive. The larger breeds were traditionally bred for the table while the lighter breeds are often used as layers as they are more productive.



Chicken Behaviour

Chickens are intelligent animals able to distinguish and give a different alarm call when threatened by various predators, while low-flying aircraft can also cause a panic among free-ranging birds. They can be nervous in open spaces as this may make them feel vulnerable to attack.

Broodiness: A hen will sit on the nest box making it unavailable to other hens. This is useful if there are fertile eggs needing incubation, otherwise temporary separation can be used to stop this behaviour.

Feather pecking: Sometimes hens will attack other birds, even drawing blood. The priority is to treat the victim with a veterinary antiseptic. If the problem persists, remove the culprit into a temporary pen within sight of the other birds. Hopefully the separation will cure the problem.

Moulting: Old feathers are shed and new feathers grow to replace them. It usually happens around once a year and the new feathers take around seven weeks to grow. This can be a stressful time for the birds and vitamin supplements will help provide the necessary nutrients.