



Keeping Chickens

Benefits of keeping chickens include fresh eggs, recycling of food and garden scraps, production of valuable manure and reduced flies, pests, and spiders in the garden area. A well designed and managed chicken system should be productive, free of smells and create a healthy and happy home for your chickens. Happy chickens are friendly, entertaining and long lived.

NORMAL BEHAVIOUR

A healthy domestic chicken will be noticeably alert, bright eyed, and have an erect carriage. Normal behaviours include preening, investigating, pecking and scratching the dirt looking for food. Free-ranging chickens will return to their roosting area voluntarily just before dusk.

EIGHT BASIC NEEDS OF CHICKENS

Clean Water

Ample cool, clean water should always be available. Chickens will not drink hot or excessively dirty water, and can quickly succumb to heat stroke or dehydration in hot weather. Similarly, care should be taken in winter that water bowls do not remain frozen for too long into the day.

Food

As a minimum, chickens should be fed a specially prepared, quality layer or scratch mix available from local produce stores. Ideally, chickens should also have regular access to grass, vegetables, food scraps and insects through free-ranging. Care should be taken to store feed in airtight, rodent proof drums or containers. Stored feed should be monitored to check for mould or dampness.



Generally chickens are fed twice a day, or continuously using a continuous feeder. Chickens love to scratch through their feed picking out the best bits. To prevent wastage, a continuous feeder that prevents chickens getting their feet into the food to scratch it around should be selected.

Other important supplements include shell grit, sand or gravel and dolomite. Chickens need to eat small stones or gravel to help grind up food in their gizzard.

Protection from the weather

Chickens need protection from cold winds, rain, prolonged dampness and heat.

In summer, deep shade should always be available. Mobile chicken runs can be moved under large trees. Fixed chicken runs will ideally include shading and protection from hot winds through the appropriate construction of walls and roofs. In very hot weather runs can be cooled by spraying with water.

Chickens have no sweat glands and will pant if they are overheated. If your chickens are panting, they are at risk of heatstroke and death.

Protection from predators

Domestic chickens are at great risk from dogs and foxes. Smaller chickens are also at risk from eagles, hawks and even currawongs and crows. Free-ranging chickens should ideally have access to low shrubs or covered areas to hide in if airborne predators are about. Foxes are very skilled at getting under, over and into chicken runs. Strategies to keep predators out include putting mesh on the bottom of cages, or burying mesh fencing 300mm below ground level or attaching a 300mm mesh skirt to the outside fence to prevent predators digging under the fence. Fixed runs will require either permanent mesh or solid roofing, or chickens should be locked into a secure shed at night.

Mobile runs can be fixed with a mesh floor or skirt.

A place to exercise

Happy chickens need opportunities to fully express their chicken behaviours. These include scratching, dust bathing, foraging and socialising.

As a minimum, chickens should be provided with around 1 square metre per large adult bird. Some flightier breeds of chickens (Leghorns) will require more space than this and others (Silkies, Pekins) may be content with much less.

Chickens have a very strong social order. In overcrowded conditions, bullying and cannibalism can occur. Watch your chickens carefully to ensure those at the bottom of the pecking order are not being victimised or prevented from feeding. Often simply providing more space will stop bullying behaviour.

Chickens love to free-range. Foraging enables chickens to select the foods that they need and to diversify their diets. Chickens will usually put themselves to bed after they have been let out to free-range. Alternatively, free-ranging chickens can easily be returned to their run if they know you are going to feed them and they are used to following a bucket or call in the expectation of food.

Happy chickens are able to dust bathe in dry, sandy hollows. The urge to dust bathe is very strong. Dust bathing helps control body lice and other parasites. Chickens kept in mobile chicken runs with mesh floors can be provided with a shallow tray (e.g. kitty litter tray) filled with sand and dirt.

A place to lay eggs

Hens need a quiet, dark place to build nests and lay eggs. Some chicken run designs provide external access to nesting boxes so that eggs can be collected without having to enter the chicken run. Nesting boxes can be lined with shredded paper, pine needles, or sawdust.



Somewhere to roost

Most chickens like to perch at night. Roosting perches should ideally be rounded and at least 50mm wide to prevent damage to birds feet. If your perches are high, make sure your chickens are able to fly up to them. Staggering perches so that chickens can hop from level to level can help too. Make sure that chickens roosting above the others can't drop their manure on the ones below. Some chickens such as Silkies do not roost at all, or prefer lower perches.

Other chickens

Chickens are strongly territorial flock birds and need company to be happy. Never keep just one chicken.

OPTIONS FOR CHICKEN HOUSING

Mobile Chicken Run

Well designed mobile chicken runs enable far greater flexibility in managing chickens and integrating them into a lawn or fruit and vegetable gardening system. Safely enclosed in a mobile run, chickens can be periodically moved to fresh ground as required. Chickens have safe access to grass each day, and runs can be left on vegetable beds after harvesting or before planting to clear weeds and pests and to add manure. As a general rule, chickens require at least 1 square metre per bird. Small, quiet breeds may require less.



Advantages of a Mobile System

- Chickens are where you want them, and not where you don't want them.
- Chickens become an active partner in a sustainable gardening system.
- Areas are not overworked. Soil in the chicken run does not become sour or compacted.
- Smaller and cheaper than a fixed run.
- Chickens can be moved to fresh green areas each day.
- Mobile run can be moved under a large tree in summer.
- There is no permanent place for mice and rats to nest.
- Well designed runs are easy to move.

Disadvantages of a Mobile System

- More than one run may be needed for large numbers of chickens.
- Care should be taken to ensure chickens remain cool in summer.
- Poorly designed runs can be difficult to move.

Fixed Run (Deep Litter) System

In this system chickens are enclosed in an airy shed with some type of deep dry litter on the floor in which they can scratch about. As a general rule, this type of run or yard should be no smaller than 20 square metres and located no closer than 8 metres from any dwelling.

Before building a fixed chicken run please check that your proposed structure meets the ACT Planning and Land Authority (ACTPLA) requirements specific

to Animal enclosures in the Exempt developments— non-habitable buildings and structures section of the Planning and Development Regulation 2008 which can be found at www.legislation.act.gov.au or by phoning ACTPLA on: (02) 6207 1923.

Advantages of a Fixed Run (Deep Litter) System

- Chickens are protected from rain, extremes in weather and predators.
- Valuable stock can be locked up and secured.
- Soiled litter provides excellent compost and mulch.
- Once the deep litter system is operational, beneficial microbes in the litter quickly break down uneaten food scraps and manure and prevent odours.

Disadvantages of a Fixed Run (Deep Litter) System

- Housing is bigger, more expensive, and needs insulation.
- Litter needs attention to keep it dry and friable.
- Chickens are entirely dependent on humans for their food.
- Fixed runs inevitably attract mice and possibly rats, which will need to be managed.
- Chickens will need to be let out and locked up to enable free-ranging and foraging.



HANDLING

Chickens need to be handled calmly and quietly. It is easier to train birds to follow a bucket of food or call in the expectation of being fed, than to round them up. Birds that are handled calmly and with care will quickly become very tame and easily managed. Chickens should be held gently, supporting the breast bone in

the crook of the arm and grasping the thighs, not the lower leg. Never pick up your chickens by their legs, neck or wings.

INTRODUCING NEW CHICKENS

Introducing new chickens to an established flock needs to be carefully managed to prevent bullying and victimisation. If more than one chicken is being introduced, keep them in a pen or enclosure near the other chickens for a few days until the two groups are used to each other. If a single chicken is being introduced, keep it in a separate enclosure, near the other birds with the hen lowest on the pecking order. Once these two chickens have bonded, they can be returned to the main flock.

The best time for new chickens to be added to the main group is at night, once the chickens have roosted. When introducing new chickens it is very likely you will need to put them onto the perches manually, as they don't know they should do this. Place the chickens onto the lower perches where they will remain until morning.

COMMON HEALTH PROBLEMS

A clean, dry living environment, good quality food, ability to free-range, clean water and adequate space are the keys to maintaining flock health. The main health problems of chickens are either parasitic or bacterial/viral in nature.

Diseases

Signs of disease or illness include diarrhoea, nasal or eye discharge, sneezing, paralysis, inactivity, head under wing, feathers ruffled, isolation from group, pale or purple comb, frequent shutting of eyes, little response when touched or pushed or being pecked by other chickens.

Sick birds should be isolated from the flock to prevent spreading of the illness. Advice should be sought from a veterinarian or experienced poultry keeper to identify the disease and select the appropriate treatment.

It is good practice to quarantine new birds from the existing flock to ensure diseases are not introduced.

Lice

Lice are more likely to be a problem during winter and while hens are sitting on eggs. Hold the chicken carefully and inspect the underside of the chicken,

close to the skin around the vent and under the wings. Small insects crawling around the skin and feather pins indicate lice. Lice can be treated with sulphur, derris dust and/or rotenone based powder available from produce stores. Remove and replace all old bedding and nesting material. Following the instructions on the label, liberally dust the underside of all chickens (not just infected chicken) making sure dust reaches under the wings and around the vent. Apply powder to nesting material as well.

Mites

Mites hide in the nesting or perching areas of pens during the day, and crawl onto chickens at night. Inspect eggs in nesting areas. If tiny dots can be observed crawling over the eggs, treat for mites. Treatment involves powders as for lice. Timber perches need to be treated with oil (old vegetable oil) as often as needed or once every two months.

Scaly leg

Chickens that develop white crusty scales on their legs are usually infested with scaly leg. It is caused by scabies like mites that burrow down between the scales on the birds legs. It is extremely irritating, and will lead to lameness and loss of condition if not treated. Scaly leg can be treated by coating the chicken's legs and perches with a mix of vegetable oil and a small amount of eucalyptus oil. The aim is to smother the mites. Treat the chickens every day for one week and then once a week for one month. Treat all birds.

Euthanasia

In the event that an animal becomes so sick, diseased or injured that recovery is unlikely or if the animal is suffering, a competent person or veterinarian should be called to assist with euthanasia.

MORE INFORMATION

ACT Health Protection Service, Keeping Poultry Information Sheet available online at www.health.act.gov.au

Welfare of Poultry: Non-Commercial Code of Practice 2010 available online at www.legislation.act.gov.au

Keeping poultry

Keeping poultry, like any other animal, has rewards but requires the keeper to maintain poultry and their surrounding grounds in hygienic conditions.

The keeping of poultry may lead to the creation of an insanitary condition. An insanitary condition is a condition that a reasonable person could consider to be a public health risk or offensive to community standards. Where an insanitary condition occurs, or may occur, ACT Health may issue a direction to remove or prevent the condition. The relevant legislation is the *Public Health Act 1997* and the *Public Health Regulation 2000*. Below is information to assist you in keeping poultry in conditions that do not become insanitary.

How you can help prevent a yard or enclosure from becoming insanitary

- Keep yards and enclosures clean and free from matter that may create offensive odours.
- Clean poultry enclosures regularly and ensure that all refuse (droppings, food scraps, etc) is disposed of properly.
- Floors of poultry enclosures should be of an impervious material underneath roosts or perches to assist with cleaning.
- Troughs for drinking water should not cause soggy ground conditions. Drinking nipples where used, should be protected from conditions, which may freeze the water source.
- Poultry feed should be stored in sealed containers. Only sufficient feed for your poultry should be given during the day, to avoid attracting vermin such as rats.
- The interior of any enclosures should be treated with insecticide to minimise insects.
- Any timber or other building materials on the site should be removed or stacked so it is clear of the ground to reduce vermin harbourage.
- If you suspect you have vermin nesting in your property take appropriate action or call a pest control operator in to assist.

If you have questions relating to the welfare of poultry, you may wish to contact the RSPCA ACT at 12 Kirkpatrick Street, Weston ACT 2611, phone: 02 6287 8100, www.rspca-act.org.au.

To access the legislation, including the *Animal Welfare Act 1992*, please visit www.legislation.act.gov.au.