

How to Start Your Chickens Off Right

Raising chickens means taking care of them from the time they're little puff balls with feet. To start your chicks off right so that they grow into healthy adults, make use of the following tips:

- **Brooder:** Confine the chicks in a brooder with solid sides about 18 inches high to keep out drafts. Make sure the brooder is near a heat source, probably a heat lamp. Give each chick 6 square inches of floor space and put the brooder somewhere dry and safe from predators.
- **Brooder floor:** Cover the floor of the brooder with pine shavings or other absorbent bedding. Do not use cedar shavings or kitty litter. Do not use newspaper. For the first two days only, cover the litter with paper towels or a piece of old cloth to keep chicks from eating the litter until they find the food.
- **Temperature:** For the first week chicks must be kept at 95° F at all times. Drop the temperature 5 degrees a week until you reach the surrounding room temperature outside the brooder or 60° F.
- **Feed:** Use baby chick starter feed for all chicks except meat bird chicks, which need meat bird starter feed. For the first day or two, sprinkle feed on a white paper plate or some white paper towels to make it easy to find. Also have feed available in feed dishes.
- **Water:** Baby chicks need water in a shallow, narrow container so they can't drown. Dip their beaks into the water gently as you put them into the brooder so they know where it is. Always have water available.
- **Handling:** Don't handle baby chicks too much. It stresses them, makes them grow poorly, and may kill them.
- **Troubleshooting:** Contented chicks are fairly quiet, spread out over the brooder eating, drinking, and sleeping. If chicks are peeping loudly and continuously, something is wrong (they're probably too cold). If they are against the brooder walls spread out and panting they are too hot.

What to Feed Your Chickens When

If you're raising chickens, remembering what feed you need for different types and ages of chickens can get confusing. What you feed a young layer is different than what you feed a mature meat bird. The following table gives you the essentials:

Chicken Type (Age)	Feed	Protein Ratio
Pet, show, and layer chicks (0 to 6 weeks)	Chick starter	18 to 20%
Pet and show chicks (6 weeks on, if not laying)	Chicken feed	12 to 14%
Laying hens (6 weeks until laying begins)	Layer finisher or grower	12%
Laying hens (through laying years)	Layer feed	16% protein + correct calcium and mineral balances
Meat birds (0 to 6 weeks)	Broiler or meat bird starter	23 to 24%
Meat birds (6 weeks to butchering)	Broiler grower-finisher or meat bird grower-finisher	18 to 20%

Daily Chores to Keep Your Chickens Healthy

If you're raising chickens, whether for eggs or meat, you want your fowl to stay healthy. Healthy chickens need attention and care every day. The following, simple measures, taken daily, help to keep your chickens healthy:

- **Keep water available at all times.** This may mean a heat source to keep water from freezing in winter.
- **Provide chickens with a quality feed formulated for their needs.** For example, meat birds need a feed with lots of protein and layers need a feed that addresses their need for additional calcium and other minerals. Feeding chickens scraps and odd grains usually leads to nutrient deficiencies.
- **Keep chickens dry and protected from weather extremes.** Their quarters should also be well ventilated to prevent lung problems.
- **Give chickens enough space.** Crowded conditions lead to stress and injuries from fighting. Each chicken needs a minimum of two square foot of shelter and three square foot of outdoor run area.