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Chicken

Raising Chicks

- Chicks that are hatched or that are obtained in the first days of life have a few critical requirements:
 - First, your chicks must readily drink. Sometimes it is necessary to teach chicks to drink by lightly dipping their beaks in water. You may supplement your chicks' water with an electrolyte solution that can be obtained at your feed store. Continue to provide fresh water, and ensure that all chicks have access to water. This may require that you put multiple water dishes in the brood area. Ensure that your water source is not low enough or deep enough for your chicks to climb into or soak themselves in. Remember, a wet chick = a cold chick = a dead chick.
 - Second, your chicks must stay warm. During the first week of life, chicks need to be kept between 32.2°C (90°F) and 35°C (95°F) for proper metabolism, growth, and comfort. This is accomplished by enclosing your chicks within an area with an overhead brood lamp (a heat lamp). Make sure that the brood lamp is not too close to the ground, and that it is not in danger of causing a fire. Leave your brood light on for 24 hours a day for the first 6 weeks. Your enclosure should be big enough that chicks can self-regulate their temperature (get away from the heat lamp), but small enough that no area is too cold. A circular enclosure is ideal so that chicks do not get stuck in any squared-off corners. Cardboard, rather than wire or mesh, is a good choice because it provides a draft-break.
 - Third, chicks need a nonslip surface to walk on. Wood shavings or wood chips are okay, but be sure that your chicks are not eating them. Do not place your chicks on sawdust or hay because this is a potential fire hazard. Newspaper can be slippery, so it is recommended to place a mesh wire, such as a window screen, over newspaper to give your chicks a good nonslip surface, and to allow you to easily clean out the brooder. This last option is probably the best.
 - Fourth, provide your chicks with starter feed from your local pet store. Any large commercial brand, such as Blue Seal, is a good choice. You can provide your chicks with as much feed as they want to eat. Some starter feeds come "medicated." It is a good idea to have your chicks on a medicated feed to prevent coccidiosis (parasitic infection). These feeds usually contain low doses of a drug known as an ionophore (e.g., Monensin). Other medicated feeds contain antibiotics such as terramycin. It is not necessary to have your chicks (or older birds) on these antibiotic medicated feeds. (**Note: Do not allow turkeys or ducks to eat this medicated feed. They eat much larger amounts and will die from toxicity. Do not allow horses access to medicated feed. It is extremely toxic to horses even at low doses.)

Information cited from:

Mayer, J and Donnelly, T., eds. Clinical Veterinary Advisor: Birds and Exotic Pets. Elsevier, Philadelphia, PA. 2013. ISBN: 9781-4160-3969-3

- Fifth, chicks that are shipped sometimes develop loose droppings that stick to their bottom. Your chicks can actually die from this. To remove the droppings, moisten with a warm cloth or towel, and gently pull away the soiled feathers.
- After the first week, your chicks will begin to grow in their feathers. You can drop the temperature in the brooder by 5 degrees for the second week, and continue to drop the temperature by 5 degrees each week after that until your chicks are 6 weeks old. At this time, your chicks should have enough feather coverage to stay warm on their own, and they can be moved out of the brooder to a coop or pen area that is predator-proof.

Raising Pullets/Growers

- Chickens between the ages of 6 weeks and 20 weeks are considered growers. You should switch your feed to a grower pellet or crumble. This includes greater amounts of protein and calcium to allow proper growth. As before, provide plenty of fresh water at all times. Competition for access to food and water can be a big problem. You should place multiple sources of food and water in the coop so that all birds have access.
- You should also begin to provide your pullets with two additional resources: grit and an extra source of calcium.
- Grit is necessary for proper digestion and can be obtained from your feed store. It comes in different sizes. Grower grit is smaller than layer grit. Use the biggest size your growers find palatable. At 6 weeks, this will be grower-sized grit, but as they get closer to 20 weeks of age, they may prefer layer-sized grit.
- Calcium is an essential nutrient for growing birds. It protects against a condition called osteoporosis, or rickets. You can easily supplement calcium with oyster shell or ground limestone from your local feed store. Provide this as you do the food and the grit—your birds will self-regulate their intake.
- Chickens older than 6 weeks of age need a place to roost off the ground. They will not sleep on the ground. This place can be provided by mounting nest-boxes, or erecting perches, in your coop. Your growers may have to be taught how to perch. For the first few days that they are out of the brooder and in the coop, check at night that the birds are using perches/ledges/nest-boxes. If you find any on the ground, place them on the roost. They will learn after a few days.

Raising Layers

- Your chickens will begin to lay eggs at around 22 to 26 weeks. If you have not already erected nest-boxes by 20 weeks, you should do so. Figure enough nest boxes that there is one nest box per five chickens.
- In the 2 weeks leading up to laying, and while your birds are laying, it is very important that they have free-choice access to your oystershell/limestone calcium source. Egg-laying requires a tremendous amount of calcium. If it is not adequately supplemented in the diet, your layers will mobilize calcium from their bones, especially the long bones of the legs. This causes the bones to be weak, and they may actually fracture. If you see any signs of lethargy, weakness, trembling, or lameness in the legs or in any of your layers, carefully examine if your birds have access to a free-choice calcium source, and if they are eating it.
- At 20 weeks, you should switch your birds to a layer crumble/pellet. This diet has a higher calcium level than the grower diet. Continue to provide grit in as large a size as your birds find palatable. As before, provide free-choice fresh water.
- Commercial waterers, brood lamps, enclosures, feeders, and nest boxes are available from hatcheries.

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