

# Chicken care guide



**woodgreen**

Helping pets and their people

# Introduction to chickens

Looking for expert advice on caring for chickens?  
You're in cluck!

In this guide, we explain everything you need to know about keeping chickens happy and healthy. Not only that, it'll also help you decide if chickens are the right type of pet for you.

Chickens are very inquisitive birds and many have their own quirky personality. Easily tamed, they can make great pets and fit into your life without too much trouble. Ex-commercial hens are especially rewarding, as you can watch them grow and develop into healthy birds. Many owners regard their chickens as a part of the family, and why not!

But don't count your chickens before they hatch (so to speak). There's lots to consider before inviting some feathery friends into your life. Let's start with some fast facts.

## Fast facts

**Male name:** Cockerel. **Female name:** Hen.

**Life expectancy:** Chickens can live for four to 12 years, depending on the breed.

**Companionship:** They need to be housed in groups. The best mix is a trio or more of hens, or a cockerel with three or more hens.

**Accommodation:** Chickens need lots of space to keep them fit, healthy and happy.

**Diet:** We recommend Layers pellets, with corn and vegetables as treats. Fresh water should always be accessible, alongside a bowl of grit to aid digestion.

**Health:** Chickens require worming every three months. A regular inspection for common mites and lice should also be carried out. Chickens can sometimes have complications with producing eggs or problems with their crop, so it's wise to research common health concerns.

**Family friendly:** Chickens can make an excellent addition to families with members of all ages and single people alike. They can become very friendly and will enjoy following you around the garden, even popping into your home when the mood takes them!





# Accommodation

## Avian Influenza

When it comes to chickens' accommodation, safety is everything. Bird Flu is a fatal virus which is spread from bird to bird either through direct contact or contact with contaminated faeces, feathers and bodily fluids. For the past few years, Bird Flu cases have increased over the winter months, leading Defra to issue guidance on how to keep your flock safe and to help prevent the spread. For more information on the latest guidance and to sign up to receive alerts, [click here](#).

## Housing your chickens

Your chickens will need a generous outdoor space to allow them to express their natural behaviours, as well as a secure overnight space. This must be both predator-proof and also bio-secure to help protect your flock from Bird Flu over the winter and to follow Defra guidelines. That means the inclusion of a covered roof and small gauge mesh to prevent wild birds getting in.



### The minimum enclosure size for a group of three chickens

**Coop:** 3ft by 3ft for three hens.

This needs to have at least two nest boxes and perches for them all to roost on.

**Aviary:** 10ft long by 5ft wide for three chickens.

Ideally, connect the aviary and coop, or position the coop inside the aviary.

Find a handy list of suitable coops and aviaries [here](#).

Groups of four or more chickens will need a larger coop or a converted shed/Wendy House, along with a bigger aviary for the garden. If you'd like more information about this, don't hesitate to contact our friendly team!

To find out how to convert your wooden shed or Wendy House into a haven for a flock of chickens, [click here](#).



## Predator-proofing

Foxes in particular are proving to be a growing problem with poultry owners as they venture more into built-up areas. So it's essential to predator-proof your poultry enclosure to prevent them from being able to get inside. It's not just foxes that are a problem – stoats and rats are too. Fortunately, there are a number of ways you can make your enclosure super safe:

- Place purpose-designed **electric fencing** around your chicken area.

- **Use small gauge welded mesh for your enclosure** – chicken wire is not predator-proof.
- **Dig the mesh into the ground** to prevent predators being able to dig in.
- **Have sturdy bolts** on all doors, lids and nest boxes that predators and young children cannot open.
- **Shut your poultry away** in a secure coop or shed overnight.
- **Attach a sturdy, secure roof** to the aviary.





### Building yourself? That's great! But please read our dos and don'ts below.

It can be fun building your own chicken accommodation, but it's vital you use the right materials. Here are a few things to keep in mind before you get started:

- **Chicken wire isn't suitable** for animal housing – it's too weak and easy for predators to break into, including smaller predators like stoats and rats who could squeeze through.
- **Use small gauge, strong welded mesh.**
- **Nail or heavy-duty staple the mesh onto the wooden frame.**
- **Use suitable wood screws to secure the run panels together.**
- **Place secure bolts on the doors of coops, nest boxes, sheds and aviaries** – predators and young children can easily open swivel latches or flimsy bolts.
- **Run lids** will need to be strong enough to withhold a predator or windblown items landing on them. **Ideally, make it in multiple sections with a supporting beam** to aid the strength and prevent dipping in the middle.

### Free-range time

Ideally, chickens should be able to free-range during the day in your garden. This gives them enough space to express their natural behaviours such as digging, scratching, running, stretching up, dust bathing, roosting and preening. However, during Bird Flu outbreaks, Defra may issue guidance stating your poultry should be kept within their enclosure, and not free-ranging.

Before free-ranging for the first time, make sure the area is completely secure to prevent any escapees. Be prepared that they will dig up any soil or flower beds to make their own dust baths or when scratching around looking for bugs. This is definitely something to remember if you take pride in the appearance of your garden!

Free-range time may not always be a suitable option for everyone, particularly if you're not home to supervise them, or you have known predators in your area.



# Enrichment



Chickens like to keep themselves busy and will soon become bored and unhappy if you don't give them activities and toys (also known as 'enrichment'). They need mental and physical stimulation, as well as the freedom to live out natural behaviours.

## Enrichment ideas for your chicken enclosure include:

- **Perches and nest boxes** in their aviary or free-range area, as well as in their coop.
- **Dust or soil baths** – fill a cat litter tray with organic compost, soil or mud.
- **Trays filled with soil or autumn leaves** for them to scratch around in.
- **Hanging treats, such as cabbages, carrots or corn on the cob**, are great stimulation for your chickens – and also very tasty! [Click here](#) to find out how to make these.

- **Large logs or tree stumps** provide a great perch, something to climb over and a great habitat for tasty bugs.
- **Secured bookcases or shelves of varying levels** for them to fly up to and sit high up in their area.
- **Card boxes and old tyres filled with straw** for them to nest in.
- **CDs or DVDs strung up** – your inquisitive feathery friends will love looking at them.
- **Old patio furniture** like chairs or tables for them jump and sit on top of.
- **Feed balls** filled with a tasty treat like corn for them to move around.
- **Old xylophone** – hang this up and your chickens will enjoy making their own music!
- **A chicken agility course** in your garden, which you can make. Be sure to have some healthy treats to hand. It's a great way to bond with your chickens and the whole family can get involved too!



# Bedding materials

An easy, affordable way of sorting out your chickens' bedding is to use shavings and plenty of wheat straw. Take care when choosing the right materials – dusty and fine bedding such as light sawdust can irritate your chickens' breathing.

## Cleaning

Keeping your chicken enclosure clean is key to preventing illness and parasites such as red mite.

Daily – spot clean	Every week – full clean
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pick up poo and wet/dirty bedding.</li> <li>• Replace dirty bedding.</li> <li>• Check nest boxes and remove any eggs to prevent your hens from getting broody. <a href="#">Click here</a> for more information about this.</li> <li>• Change their water.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thoroughly clean any perches, enrichment, bowls and feeders, with pet-friendly disinfectant.</li> <li>• Fully sweep out their enclosure, removing all bedding and clean down with pet-friendly disinfectant.</li> <li>• Set up the enclosure with fresh bedding and place different toys in to keep the environment interesting for them.</li> </ul>

## Collecting your chickens' eggs

Wear gloves when collecting eggs from your chickens. If this isn't possible, you should always wash your hands before and after collecting them. Make sure you don't wash the eggs – this is part of Defra legislation. The eggs have a natural, protective layer on them which helps to keep out bacteria, and washing the eggs removes that.

*We recommend collecting eggs daily, particularly if you own a cockerel, to prevent your hens from hatching any eggs. Rescue centres like Woodgreen often have long waiting lists due to hatching projects in homes and schools where the majority of chicks hatched could be cockerels. [Click here](#) to find out more.*



# Chicken companionship

Chickens love a chinwag. They're naturally very sociable animals and they should always be kept in groups of three or more. This also helps to prevent one from being left by itself if the other one passes away.

They can be kept in flocks consisting of just hens, or the hens can be kept with one cockerel.

## Cockerels

Cockerels make great pets. They can be gentle little things which ooze charisma. And it goes without saying they're very handsome too!



They've a bit of a reputation for being noisy and aggressive, but this isn't true for a lot of them. Hens benefit from having a cockerel with them as they'll hunt food, such as worms and slugs for the hens to eat. And they'll help to sort out any tension or squabbles within the group, ward off predators, and if necessary, fight them to protect the hens.

To find out more about why cockerels make great pets, and if they might be right for you, [click here](#).

## Ex-caged/ ex-commercial hens

One option for rehoming hens is to take on some ex-commercial hens. They are rescued from farms when they're around 18 months old, where farmers feel they're not laying as many eggs, or as frequently, as they need. They usually arrive looking a bit worse for wear, with a lack of feathers, but these grow back quite quickly. When they're fully settled and happy, most will continue laying, but it may be more sporadic for some, and others may stop laying altogether.

[Click here](#) to find out why ex-caged/ex-commercial hens make great pets.



# Introducing your chickens to one another

If you find yourself with a lone chicken, or you'd like to increase the size of your flock, please give us a shout at Woodgreen, as we may be able to help! We usually have hens looking for homes and can offer you advice on the best ways to introduce them when you get them home – and ensure the best chance of success!

## How to introduce them

When introducing new chickens to one another, make sure they're all in good health and none have any injuries or wounds. There are three main ways to mix them, which are evening mixing (coop method), split mixing and new territory mixing. Don't worry if you've never heard of these methods – you can read more about them [here](#).



# Getting around with your chickens

**It's important that you always have a pet carrier available in case you need to take your chickens to the vet. There are a number of different options for chickens:**

- Cardboard boxes with multiple holes.
- Hard plastic cat carriers.
- Dog crates.

Place a large towel or blanket over the top when transporting them to help in keeping them calm and relaxed. Also place some newspaper and straw inside to ensure they're as comfortable and relaxed as possible.



# Feeding your chickens

The key to a long and healthy life for a chicken is a natural and varied diet. Like us humans, filling that diet with lots of different things keeps life interesting for them too!

Chickens are very partial to Layers Pellets. These can be combined with mixed corn as an occasional treat. Use a chicken feeder or two to place the pellets in and leave this out for them to feed from throughout the day. Take it away at night to discourage pests and to prevent the chickens from overeating, giving their crop a chance to empty overnight. For more feeders we recommend, [click here](#).

Ex-commercial hens are fed a slightly different diet on their farms. If you rehome one directly from a farm, start them on a softer feed known as mash or crumb. You can then gradually wean them onto Layers Pellets and mixed corn. It's also a good idea to feed them in a tray for the first few days, since they may not recognise a feeder. Soon enough, they'll be loving their new life with you!

## Grit

Always make sure your chickens have access to grit by placing a bowl or two in their aviary. As they don't have teeth, this helps them grind down and digest their food.

For smaller chicken breeds, look for a smaller sized grit.

## Water

It'll come as no surprise that access to water for your feathery friends is a must - even overnight. Make sure to provide your chickens with water in a suitable chicken drinker to prevent it from being contaminated or knocked over (accidents happen!). Clean the drinker weekly and give them fresh water daily. Adding some Apple Cider Vinegar into their drinker once a week (5ml per 1litre of water), can be great for keeping your chickens in good health. When using it, never place it in a metal drinker as the apple cider vinegar can react with the metal and cause poisoning of your chickens. Plastic drinkers are a perfect option here.







## Healthy treats

Defra legislation states that it's illegal to feed your chickens kitchen scraps, unless it's from a completely vegan household. This is due to the risk of cross contamination which could lead to disease outbreaks. For more information on this, please [click here](#).

There are a number of healthy foods that you can feed your chickens in moderation:

- Cabbage
- Carrots
- Corn on the cob
- Grapes
- Melon
- Strawberries
- Tomatoes
- Your chickens will also love it if you lift a log and let them forage for any bugs underneath!

# Keeping your chickens healthy

There are lots of things you can do to ensure your chickens are in tip-top condition. Make sure you health check them regularly and look out for any changes in their behaviour every day (more on this below).

If you've any concerns, act quickly and contact your poultry savvy vet.

Watch our video on how to health check them [here](#).



## Finding a vet

It's really important to find a vet in your area who has lots of experience with chickens. Most vets will see cats and dogs on a daily basis and will have an extensive knowledge of their needs. Other species such as chickens will rarely (if ever) be seen by most standard vets. Finding someone who has plenty of experience in seeing, diagnosing and treating these species is vital.

- Use the links below to look for a chicken-friendly vet in your area: Hen friendly vets | British Hen Welfare Trust ([bhwt.org.uk](http://bhwt.org.uk)) [www.chickenvet.co.uk/find-a-vet](http://www.chickenvet.co.uk/find-a-vet)
- Talk to friends and family who own or have owned chickens to see if there are any vets in particular that they recommend.

## Clipping your chickens wings

This will prevent them from escaping, which could put them in danger and at risk from predators. Clip both wings, as your chickens can still attempt to fly with only one wing clipped, which could get them into tricky situations. When wing clipping, the aim is to cut the main

flight feathers. Always leave your chickens with three or four feathers for preening. The diagram opposite shows how to wing clip with clean, sharp scissors.

## Common illnesses

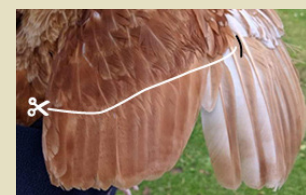
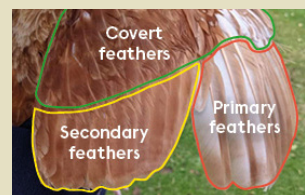
### Worms

Your chickens will need worming once every three months. This will prevent worms as well as treat them, if needed. Flubenvet is a powder-based wormer that can be mixed with your chickens' normal pellets and fed to them consecutively for seven days. You can still eat your chickens' eggs when they're on Flubenvet.

### Lice

Help to prevent lice by treating your chickens routinely with powder like Diatomaceous Earth. Apply the powder under each wing and between the shoulders on the back. Alternatively, place the powder in their dust or soil baths regularly.

Lice are often visible and orange in colour. They can be seen by parting the feathers on your chicken's back to show the skin. You should wear gloves when handling chickens with lice.





# How to health check your chickens

The first step is, ideally, to bring your chicken indoors and sit them on a towel so they are comfy.

**Comb and wattle** – make sure this area is a bright red colour and free from any injury. Their comb should be upright.

**Nose** – these should be clean and free of any discharge, with no noisy breathing.

**Ears** – these should be clean and free of any discharge, with no noisy breathing.

**Mouth and beak** – look inside their mouth and check that it's clean and clear.

**Eyes** – these should be clean, clear and bright, with no swelling around the eye area.

**Bottom vent and genitals** – these should be clean and free of matted feathers.

**Your chicken's skin and feathers** should be clean and healthy-looking with no wounds, matted feathers or signs of lice or mites.

**Body** – this should be free of any lumps or bumps.

**Crop** – check this isn't solid with food or full of fluid.

**Legs, feet and toes** – check these are free of any sores. Scales on their legs should feel smooth, not raised.

**Weight** – use some scales to monitor their weight.

**Nails** – and finally, check these are a regular length.



## Red mite

Red mites are a very common blood-sucking bug, which will appear at night to feed off your hens' blood. They're the size of a pin prick. Low numbers will cause irritation, but large numbers can lead to anaemia in your chickens. Painting their coop or overnight space white will help you to quickly spot them and treat your chickens. Add Diatomaceous Earth, available from pet shops, to their nest boxes and dust baths to help prevent an infestation.

## Scaly leg

Scaly leg occurs when mites infest your chickens' legs, burying

beneath the scales so they lift and appear uneven. Smother your chickens' legs in Vaseline daily to suffocate the mites. In extreme cases, their legs may need cleaning with surgical spirit for a few days until the old scales fall off and new ones can grow through. Scaly leg is contagious and can be passed from bird to bird, so it's best to treat all birds kept in the same area. Scaly leg spray can be applied during your routine health checks to help prevent the condition.

There are a number of other common illnesses to be aware of. [Click here](#) to find out more.



*And there you have it, you're now an 'expert' in all things chickens! Don't forget there are also advice articles on our website at [woodgreen.org.uk](http://woodgreen.org.uk)*



# Looking for more expert pet advice?

We cover a range of different topics on our website – and not just for your small furry friends, but cats and dogs, too!

Not only that, but we also offer phone appointments, workshops, training classes, webinars and courses.

Find out more at [\*\*woodgreen.org.uk\*\*](https://www.woodgreen.org.uk),  
call **0300 303 9333**  
or email [\*\*info@woodgreen.org.uk\*\*](mailto:info@woodgreen.org.uk)



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