



Practice Limited to Birds, Reptiles and Exotics

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## *Chicken Health Care Sheet*

Various breeds of chicken have been developed from the domestication of the red jungle fowl for many purposes: egg laying, meat, or exhibition. Always research the breed of chicken you want to see if they are hardy in hot or cold weather, and consider the temperatures of the area you live in when deciding on a particular breed. Chickens do make great indoor and outdoor pets.

**LAWS/REGULATIONS:** In recent years urban backyard chickens have become very popular, but be sure to look up the laws and regulations for your city/parish regarding management, number of chickens allowed, and if you can own roosters.

**BEHAVIOR:** Chickens, if raised with consistent human interaction, are gentle and have good temperaments. However, both hens and roosters can become aggressive during breeding season. Outside chickens spend time eating grass and insects, and enjoy regular dust baths, which are all essential to keep them healthy and help prevent feather destructive behavior. Chickens love foraging, and will eat shiny or other inappropriate items such as nails or screws, jewelry, rubber bands, insulation materials, grouting, or anything else small they can peck at and swallow. Keep these items away from them, as they can cause serious health problems if ingested.

**HOUSING:** Many people spend time with their chickens indoors, but in general chickens are more easily kept outside with their own predator-proof enclosure and coop. Chickens are flock birds and usually kept in a group, which helps promote good mental health. Chicken coops should be sturdy, well ventilated, provide shelter from weather, safety for sleeping, and a place for laying eggs. Coops need substrate at the bottom which should be changed weekly and when it gets soiled or wet. Frequent substrate changes are also very important in order to prevent ammonia build up inside the coop. Suitable substrates include hay, aspen or pine shavings, straw, recycled paper products, or shredded paper. Predator proofing can be accomplished by covering the sides and top with chicken wire and hardware cloth (found at most hardware stores). Bury the bottom sides of the enclosure about half a foot underground to keep predators from digging under and into enclosures. Shade cloth should be used to cover half of the top and sides of the enclosure to keep chickens cool during hot periods.

**DIET:** For the first 8 weeks of their lives, chicks should be fed a 20% chick starter mash. Feeding adult food can cause developmental problems. Some brands available include Nutrena, Dumor, organic feed from [www.mypetchicken.com](http://www.mypetchicken.com), and Purina. There are different types of feed for adults, including layer, broiler, and maintenance. If your hens are laying eggs, they should be on a layer diet. Broiler diets are for roosters specifically. The maintenance diet can be used for both roosters and when the hens stop laying eggs. A pelleted diet is essential for proper health. **Chicken scratch or cracked corn should only be used as a treat.** Fresh greens (collards, turnips, mustard, kale, red leaf lettuce, etc.) should be offered to supplement the diet. Mealworms or earthworms can also be used as a treat. It is best not to feed your chicken your leftover "scraps" or bread, as they can cause digestive problems and obesity. Chickens in enclosures should always have grit available. Lime or crushed oyster shells can also be offered for an extra source of calcium but are not essential if a properly balanced pelleted diet is used. Chickens should always have access to fresh, clean water.

**HEALTH:** The main goal for a small backyard “urban” flock of chickens is disease prevention. Closed flocks (where you do not introduce new chickens into the flock) are very successful because most diseases pass from chicken to chicken by direct contact. Disease can also occur if you handle sick birds and then handle your own flock without changing clothes and washing hands first. If you are going to introduce a new chicken to your flock, it is recommended the new bird(s) be quarantined for a period of not less than one month in a completely separate area where contact is not possible. **All chickens should have health exams done by an experienced avian/poultry veterinarian, and checked for intestinal parasites.** During quarantine, the new chickens should be watched very carefully and checked often for signs of illness. Some signs of illness are lethargy, not eating, loose odiferous stool, lesions on the comb, wattles, mouth or face, stool stuck to the feathers around the vent, or weakness. Commercial chicks are usually vaccinated as soon as they hatch for diseases such as Marek’s disease, Poxvirus, Newcastle’s disease, infectious bursal disease, and infectious laryngotracheitis. Small breeding facilities usually do not vaccinate. Always ask about vaccination status when you obtain your chicks or chickens.

***We strongly recommend annual health examinations on all exotics!***

