

Backyard Poultry

DPIPWE's guide for Hobby Farmers

Legal requirements

As a backyard poultry owner, you have responsibilities under the Animal Health Act 1995 and the Animal Welfare Act 1993.

If you live in a residential area, you should also check with your local council about whether it has any restrictions or requirements about backyard poultry.

The commercial production of eggs for human consumption is regulated under the Primary Produce Safety (Egg) Regulations 2014 (Egg Food Safety Scheme). If you are thinking about selling eggs, check your [legal obligations under the Egg Food Safety Scheme](#).



About Chickens

Providing they are not killed by a predator in the meantime, backyard chickens can live to seven or eight years and some have been known to live even longer.

Egg production varies according to the breed, but most chickens in smallholding conditions will lay around four to five eggs a week for the first two or three years. That number declines as the bird gets older.

The colour of the egg shell is determined by the breed of chicken. It has nothing to do with egg quality.

Before you get your poultry

You should assess the risk from predators. The most common predators of backyard poultry in Tasmania are feral cats, domestic dogs and quolls. A good starting point is to ask any neighbour that has or has had backyard poultry whether they have had any attacks on their birds. If there is a predator risk, you will need to build better protection into your chook run (see below). In some cases, the likelihood of predator attack is so great that running backyard poultry is simply not viable.

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Getting your birds

The easiest way for a complete novice is to buy “point of lay” pullets. These are birds that are around four-five months old and should start laying around four-six weeks after you buy them.

You could buy “day old” chicks, but you will have to “brood” them at the correct temperature, keep them free of draughts and in good light. This means a better housing arrangement, including possibly some temperature control equipment, than for “point of lay” pullets. Day old chicks are not recommended for novices or people that are not on their property most of the time.



Sometimes, “in lay” hens are offered for sale at farmers markets or through the local classifieds. These can be “spent hens” which, as the name suggests, are beyond their productive years and may also be a higher disease risk. It is worth satisfying yourself that the hens are healthy and still productive if you are going to buy them. Note that hens that are “in lay” will often go “off lay” for a week or two when you bring them home. This is a normal reaction to the stress of being put into a new and unfamiliar environment.

Which breed?

There are various reasons for wanting to have a few backyard chooks. If yours is simply to have a supply of eggs, the best bird for a backyard is a crossbreed, both in terms of egg production and a long and healthy life. The more common crossbreeds are:

- White leghorn cross – typically white and small. A good layer but not much meat. Can have a nervous disposition.
- Australorp cross – typically black and large (so a good table bird once they have stopped laying). A tendency to go broody, so less productive in eggs. Usually a calm disposition.
- Rhode Island Red cross – typically reddish brown. Highly productive in eggs and are usually calm. They are probably the best option for backyarders who simply want plenty of eggs with the least hassle.

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How many eggs?

While egg production varies according to the breed (as does the number of years of egg production), a backyarder could expect around five eggs per week during the first two years of a bird's life and that number will gradually decline as the bird gets older. Depending on the breed and its diet, a backyard chicken would still typically be producing an egg or two a week when seven or eight years old.

Some crossbreeds can produce more eggs than others but that typically means the bird will become a "spent hen" at an earlier age. For example, the Isa Brown is a prolific egg producer in its first two years (seven eggs a week is not uncommon), but egg production falls away quickly in its third and fourth year.

There will be a period of non-production of eggs during moulting in winter.

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Chicken Feed

Chickens have been selectively bred over a long time to produce more eggs. A diet that might have been okay for the chicken of 30 or more years ago is not sufficient to meet the nutritional demands of the modern laying chicken. A chicken cannot lay good quality eggs on a poor quality diet. Also, the nutritional state of the chicken determines the body's resistance to various common bugs such as mycoplasma, parasite infestations (internal and external) and so on.

Kitchen scraps are NOT a sufficient diet for layers or for young, growing birds. The common problems with backyard poultry fed on kitchen scraps are:

- Calcium deficiency (causes poor bone growth and rickets).
- Protein deficiency (causes the chicken to draw on its own reserves to produce eggs, which in turn causes the chicken to become "spent" before it gets old).
- Energy deficiency (causes poor growth, weight loss and poor egg production).
- Vitamin A deficiency (poor skin and feathering).
- Left over scraps encourage vermin.
- Kitchen scraps may contain bacteria and viruses that affect poultry.

Similarly, hens that free range on lush grass may suffer malnutrition simply because they substitute grass for more highly nutritious feed such as mash or pellets which they need to stay healthy and produce good quality eggs.

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You should be feeding a properly formulated diet. Poultry enthusiasts who know what they are doing can successfully make up their own feed, but most people with backyard chickens should use the poultry pellets or mash that are available from the local rural merchandise store. Please note that some layer feeds are high in calcium, which is good for layers but can cause kidney damage in growing birds or chicks (so buy grower feed for them).

Feed should be available to the chickens all the time – self-feeders are ideal. A trough is second-best and you will need to clean out any stale, wet or mouldy feed frequently. A self-feeder will reduce the amount of feed wasted and it won't take long to pay for itself by the feed saved. As a rough guide, six layers should get through 5kgs of formulated feed a week. Keep chicken feed away from vermin and in a cool, dry place. Essential vitamins and minerals degrade under poor storage conditions and with age. It is best to have no more than a month's supply of feed on hand. Wet chicken feed can grow bacteria that are highly toxic, so don't feed grain, pellets or mash that have a crust or seem lumpy, as this indicates the bag may have been wet at some stage.

Have some coarse shell grit available for the hens during the peak laying periods.

It is important you check the body condition of your chickens, as this is a very good indicator as to whether you are feeding them properly – a guide showing how to do a body condition check is included in this fact sheet.

Water

Water is one of the most important nutrients that is often overlooked. Typically, a chicken will consume twice as much water as feed (measured by weight). Many chemical reactions necessary in the processes of digestion and nutrient absorption only happen properly with water. Also, in chickens, water softens feed in the crop to prepare it for grinding in the gizzard. An inadequate water supply can cause serious health and welfare problems for the chicken very quickly.

It is most important to have an adequate supply of clean, fresh, cool water available to your chickens at all times. If you use an automatic waterer, it should be placed in the coolest area of the henhouse or pen. It must be checked daily to make sure it is not blocked or the supply has been inadvertently turned off/run out. If you are relying on manually filled waterers, you need to change the water daily.

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Chicken health

To protect your chickens' health, you should ensure that wild birds cannot access their water or feed. A number of diseases exist in wild birds that can be easily transmitted to your poultry by contamination of the feed or water supply. Wild birds can also eat a significant proportion of your hen's feed – increasing costs.

Providing your backyard chickens have a sufficient, uncontaminated diet, most will have a healthy life.

Backyard chickens sometimes get very fat or very thin. Neither is good for the bird. You should learn how to score the body condition of your chickens (see below). A laying hen should have good muscle cover over her keel or breast bone (Score 2). This means she has some reserves up her sleeve in case of sudden weather changes or feed shortages. Very prominent keel bones with little or no muscle cover indicates the hen is too thin (Scores 1 and 0) and will not cope well with the vagaries of the backyard environment. Plump fowls (Score 3) with bulging 'muscles' over the keel bone are probably not laying very well, if at all, and are probably free-loaders.

The most common health problem with backyard chickens (providing they have a sufficient diet and are not exposed to sick birds) is the large variety of external parasites (ticks, mites etc) that can affect them. Most are successfully treated with products available from your local rural merchandiser and you should routinely treat the chickens every 2 or 3 months.

Internal parasites (i.e. worms) can be a problem for backyard chickens. Prevention is better than cure, so regular removal of faeces from the chicken run/coop is important. If your birds show signs of diarrhoea, weight loss or pale combs, they might have worms. In which case you will need to ask your vet to identify the particular type of worm as that will determine the specific worm treatment needed. If you do treat your chickens for worms, observe the withholding period for that particular treatment – that is, don't eat any eggs produced within that withholding period.

Respiratory disease can be a problem in chickens – they may wheeze, sneeze or cough and generally look miserable. Some respiratory diseases can affect shell quality and, as hens will not be eating adequately, their egg production will drop. There are many such diseases, and two are of special importance – avian influenza (AI), of which there are a large number of strains, and Newcastle disease (ND). ND and most strains of AI are emergency animal diseases and you have a responsibility under the Animal Health Act to report any suspicion of either.

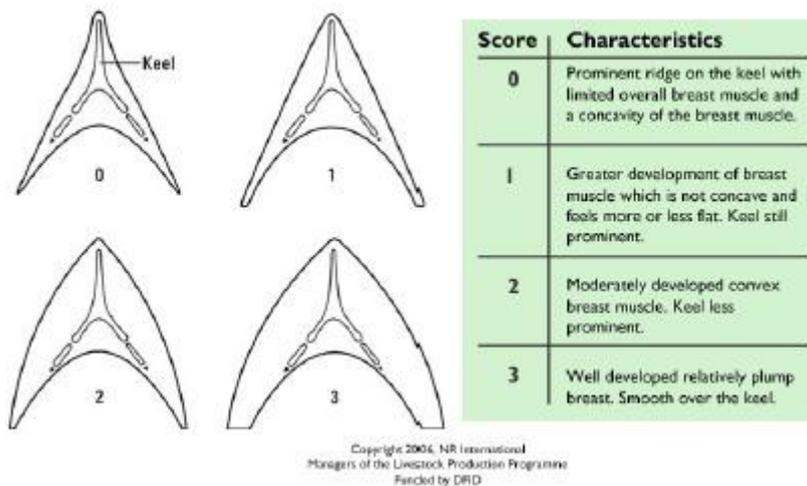
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If you have birds that die quickly (sometimes too quickly to develop any signs of being sick) or that become very sick quickly, you must immediately contact your vet or the DPIPWE Emergency Animal Disease Watch Hotline on 1800 675 888. (leave a message)

Body Condition Scoring System for Layer Hens

The chicken is held by the legs in one hand, usually upside down. The palm of the other hand is then used for palpating and grading the protuberance of the keel (i.e. breast bone), the development of the breast muscles immediately alongside the ventral ridge of the keel, and the convexity or concavity of the breast muscle contour. A study by Gregory and Robins has demonstrated that this system of scoring has a good relationship with the bird's fat and muscle reserves.



Human health

While there are many pluses in having a few backyard chooks, a significant negative is the risk of a human getting food poisoning from eggs or home killed chicken meat. Food pathogens can be both inside the egg and outside (ie on the shell) – the latter being the greater risk in terms of salmonella infection. So, undercooked eggs are a risk but poor hygiene during food preparation is a greater risk.

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Another significant risk of salmonella infection is the backyard vegetable patch that has been fertilised with poultry manure. You can reduce the risk of salmonella infection by following simple and basic hygiene rules when preparing food:

- Wash your hands after handling eggshells and before handling any other food – and, of course, before eating.
- Thoroughly wash any vegetables you have grown using poultry manure.
- If your birds are free range and you come across a nest that you haven't seen before, don't use those eggs as you won't know how long they have been there.
- Collect your eggs daily. Twice daily in very hot weather.
- Store your eggs in the fridge and use the oldest eggs first.
- Don't use eggs that are cracked or that have been wet while in the nest (wet egg shells are porous and may allow the salmonella bacteria into the egg).
- Avoid undercooking eggs. Eggs are properly cooked when the white is firm and the yolk is at least starting to thicken.

Chicken welfare

Chickens are included in the Animal Welfare Act 1993. This means that if you own, manage or care for a chicken, you have legal responsibilities in relation to its welfare.

The most important welfare issues are:

- Providing a sufficient diet and ready access to water (see above).
- Providing a weatherproof coop (or similar) so the birds can roost away from weather extremes.
- If predators are a risk in your area, a vermin-proof run for the birds.
- Isolating any sick bird from the others and seeking veterinary advice in a timely manner.

Housing backyard chickens

Some people allow their backyard poultry free range. That is fine providing you don't have dogs or other pets that will hassle them (or worse), you don't mind chicken faeces around the place and you are prepared to go looking for your eggs. Otherwise, you should provide them with an outside run. Such a run will, inevitably, lose any vegetation and become muddy in wet weather.

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Whether your birds are free range or confined to a run, you must ensure they have a coop or something similar. The most important feature of a coop is that it should be easy to clean out. So, ideally, there should be a human-size door and the internal walls should be non-porous. Perches should be at least 250mm per bird and, of course, not directly above the feed or water. An ideal perch is 75x50 mm timber about half a metre off the floor.

Ideally, the coop should have a chicken mesh front facing northeast (to catch the morning sun) with an enclosed, draught-free back portion, which is where the nesting boxes should be. One nesting box for each four or five birds. The nesting box should be around 300mm square and half a metre or so off the ground. It makes life easier for you and your chooks if the nesting box has a hinged opening at the back so you can collect the eggs from outside the coop.

Poultry shows

A poorly-run show is a major risk to the health of all birds attending. If you intend to exhibit your birds at a show, you should first satisfy yourself that the organisers have a good biosecurity plan in operation. In particular that they don't allow sick birds onsite, they keep good records of exhibitors (essential in helping traceback in the event of a disease outbreak) and that judges wash their hands in between handling birds. Waterfowl should not be on display in the same area as chickens, pigeons or other fowl.

You should clean and disinfect bird containers before and after every show. And quarantine your show birds from the rest of your flock after the show, so you can check for any signs of disease they may have brought home.

Emergency slaughter

Dislocation of the neck is the most humane way of euthanasing a bird that is too sick or injured to recover. This involves stretching the neck, in a swift and decisive action, to sever the spinal cord. It should not be done by someone who is likely to cause the bird further suffering by failing to complete this unpleasant task quickly. If you are not confident you can euthanase it, find an experienced person who can or, preferably, take the bird to your vet rather than let the animal continue to suffer from whatever ailment it may have.

Contacts

For most enquiries relating to poultry health and nutrition, contact your local vet. To report what you suspect may be an emergency poultry disease (including any unexplained significant sickness or unexplained mortalities in two or more birds), contact your local vet or the DPIPWE emergency animal disease hotline on 1800 675 888.

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To report any animal cruelty (including neglect), phone the RSPCA Inspectorate on 1300 139 947 or by email reportit@rspcatas.org.au.

If you are thinking about selling eggs, information about your responsibilities under the Primary Produce Safety (Egg) Regulations 2014 is available on the DPIPWE website.



Contact

**Animal Biosecurity and Welfare Branch Biosecurity Tasmania
Ph 1300 368 550**

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