

Keeping chickens: a beginner's guide By DEFRA

Many people keep chickens to supply eggs or just as pets. There are laws around keeping chickens and selling eggs. If you are thinking of getting chickens, find out what you need to get started and how to keep your new brood safe and healthy.

What chickens need

Like all animals, looking after chickens takes some time and effort. You also need enough outside space for a chicken coop or shed and an exercise space. Find out more in the 'Where to keep chickens' section on this page.

For more detailed advice on keeping chickens visit the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) website.



You should check with your local council, and read the deeds of your house to make sure keeping livestock is allowed. It's also a good idea to tell your neighbours too.

Where to keep chickens

Chickens should be kept outdoors in a coop or shed. You can buy chicken coops from home improvement stores or online, or you could build your own.

Your coop should have:

- at least 250 centimetres squared floor area for each bird
- a perch for them to stand on while they sleep
- an exercise space, or 'run'
- a nesting box filled with wood shavings for the hens to lay eggs

You should clean the chicken coop every week and put out fresh bedding.

You can find advice for commercial farmers on the welfare of chickens on the Defra website. This is also useful for smallholders.

Keeping chickens safe from predators

Most people who keep chickens have some experience of predators – usually foxes – getting into the coop.

Foxes can climb over or dig under fences, and squeeze through very small spaces. Some tips to keep your chickens safe are:

- use wire mesh fencing all the way around and above the coop
- fix wooden boards to the base of the fence
- check the coop regularly to make sure it is secure
- shut the chickens into their coop at night



Feeding and watering chickens

You can buy ready-made food that has everything chickens need to keep them healthy. It is illegal to feed chickens with waste food from your kitchen, including vegetable scraps. For more details on the laws on feeding chickens and other farm animals visit the Defra website.

Grit is also an important part of a chicken's diet. The tiny stones help them break down and digest their food. Keep a supply of grit available and the chickens will help themselves to however much they need.

Chickens need a constant supply of clean drinking water. Try to choose a container that the chickens can't step in or knock over.

Choosing your chickens

You can buy chickens of any age, from chicks that are still in the egg to mature birds. Young chicks can be difficult to look after, and you would need special equipment and food to hatch your own.

If you are new to keeping chickens you could start with hens of 4-5 months. They are just starting to lay eggs and are easy to look after.

Breeds of chicken

There are many breeds of chicken to choose from, and different breeds have particular characteristics. Many people start off with breeds that are easy to take care of and produce a lot of eggs, for example:

- Light Sussex
- Rhode Island Red
- Brown Leghorn

You can also get mixed breeds of chickens, or 'hybrids'. They generally lay more eggs than pure breeds.

Buying chickens

There are magazines for people who keep a small number of animals, and they often carry adverts of chickens for sale. Try searching the internet for 'smallholder magazines'.

When you buy chickens, try to select healthy birds that have:

- bright eyes
- glossy feathers
- a red comb (the fleshy area on their heads)

You can also rescue hens from intensive farms. The British Hen Welfare Trust and Hen Rehomers UK websites have more information on this.

Keeping chickens for eggs

Three hens are enough to supply you with eggs all year. Some breeds lay up to one egg per day, so you could end up with more than you wanted.

If you have fewer than 50 birds you can sell unmarked eggs at your gate or locally door to door. If you sell eggs to someone who will sell them on, such as a shopkeeper, you need to register with the Egg Marketing Inspectorate. For more details on egg marking visit the Defra website.



Keeping chickens for meat

If you want to keep chickens for meat, you must be prepared to eventually slaughter them. The Humane Slaughter Association runs courses on how to kill chickens while keeping their distress to a minimum.

If you don't want to do the job yourself, you could contact a local slaughterhouse. An internet search of abattoirs in your area will turn up a few options.

Hatching your own chicks

Once you're used to keeping a few hens you might consider raising some chicks. This is more work than looking after hens, so you should research and prepare beforehand. One thing to consider is what to do with male hatchlings if you only want hens for laying. The Poultry Club has advice on hatching chicks.

Registering your flock

Register your flock online at GB Poultry Register

If you have 50 or more birds you must register your flock. You must do this even if you only have 50 or more birds for part of the year. If you have fewer than 50 birds you do not have to register, but Defra encourage keepers to do so on a voluntary basis. This is to help alert owners in case of disease outbreaks.

You can register your flock online at GB Poultry Register or by calling 0800 634 1112.

Diseases that affect chickens

The most important chicken infections in the UK are salmonella and campylobacter which may cause problems in people.

Other important conditions are coccidiosis, Marek's disease, infectious bursal disease (Gumboro disease), infectious bronchitis and lameness.

Some less common but important diseases from overseas are Newcastle disease (fowl pest) and avian influenza (fowl plague).

To find out more about these diseases visit the Defra page on common chicken diseases. You can also register with Animal Health to receive alerts about disease outbreaks and advice on how to deal with them.

