

Basic Chicken Husbandry

Chickens are remarkably hardy animals. They require little time and effort to be adequately cared for. With more than a little time and effort, they become engaged household participants. The basics of having productive, healthy chooks are provided below.

◆ Shelter

For sleeping, they need a fully enclosable, water-proof space that can fit a perch and, preferably, a nest. Make sure you can easily access all areas of the space.

They also need shelter from rain and sun during the day. It can be as simple as dense bushes or a veranda to shelter under.

Not strictly shelter, chooks also like space for dust bathing. All you will need to provide is adequate space, they will do the rest.

◆ Food

Daily at a minimum. You can fill a feeder around the same time each day, and let them come and go as they please (and the visiting birds too). Another method is to provide the chooks all they feed can eat for 5 minutes, twice a day.

There are two purchased feed options. Just pellets or pellets mixed with seeds. Buying in bulk is the best option. 20 kg bags can feed 5 chooks for approximately 6 weeks.

Kitchen scraps and green yard waste makes excellent food for chooks. If you have a significant volume of scraps and waste, it may be enough without purchased feed. If feeding just scraps and waste, you will need to ensure a good supply of grit, for example dirt, egg shells or small bits of gravel. They eat meat, but not bones. They don't like citrus. They love parsley.

Chooks eat the most voraciously before they start laying eggs, so it is a good idea to keep an eye on the feeder (if you use one) as the grrrls grow.

◆ Water

Daily top up, twice daily in summer or if have lots of visiting birds. You may need to crack the ice layer in winter.

If keep water quite separate from feeder (if using one), will reduce impact on land as animals will no reason to crowd around one spot.

- ◆ Physical checks
On purchase – get only healthy chooks.

A week or two after get them home – just to make sure nothing unwanted came with them.

Monthly usually ok, after established they haven't brought anything with them.

Do keep an eye out for any unusual movements, discharge or behaviours. That is, do physical checks as required.

Regular checks are for lice (in the feathers), state of feet and wings, beaks and eyes, and feather condition.

If handling them is a problem, wait until dusk, when they are on the perch. Or you can check them after they have gone to sleep. Chickens are quite docile when asleep/in the dark, so you can take them one-by-one to a lit area for inspection.

- ◆ Wing clipping
It's not compulsory to clip a chook's wing, but it can be prudent. Chooks are not great flyers, but can get up high to a resting spot, before fly/crashing to the ground. Often to a side of a fence from which they cannot return.

Cut the feathers of only one wing. Take at least the top quarter off the bigger feathers.

Feathers grow back. Check the clipped wing during regular physical checks and trim as required.

- ◆ Cleaning
At least fortnightly (depending on sleeping arrangements and season) you'll need to 'muck out'.

Areas that you want to use for walking, sitting, sunbaking etc. that the grrrls have regular access to, will need to be raked at least every second day.

- ◆ Fencing
As well as sorting the fencing before the chooks arrive, there is likely be on-going fencing needs. For example, temporary fencing to take advantage of chook gardening skills such as weeding and mowing.

- ◆ Security

The chooks sleeping area needs to be secure from predators – notably foxes and cats.

Their main yard/day space needs to be difficult for them to get out of, and unattractive to cats (foxes are very unlikely to visit during the day).

You may wish to secure the food from possums. It will certainly need to be stored so as to not attract mice and rats.

Chooks like their nest to be hidden/protected. Egg laying is serious business.

Snakes, birds and goanna's take eggs. This predation can be reduced by adequate siting of nest, fencing and vigilance.

- ◆ Socialisation/familiarisation

While a basic level of familiarisation is required to make the regular physical checks a breeze, only a little extra time and effort is required to socialise the chooks so they will readily submit to handling and come when called.