

HEALTHY FARMS LARGE

ANIMAL VETERINARY SERVICES



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Raising Chickens in Central Vermont

Some super-basics and resources for how to get started raising chickens!

Feeding and housing chicks: baby chicks need chick starter: medicated or not. Medicated means has a coccidiostat. If you wish to use unmedicated starter, you will want to check feces for coccidia parasites every 4-6 weeks starting at 4 weeks of age because coccidia is one of the largest problems found in poultry that leads to decreases in weight gain and production. The key to preventing coccidia is moving the birds frequently to clean areas. Coccidia parasites survive for years in soil and on premises! Don't forget a safely-installed heat lamp for your chicks in colder months. Chicks must be kept warm enough *and with adequate ventilation* to thrive. You should be able to comfortably breathe down very low where the heavy ammonia gases from feces and urine accumulate.

Adults need a layer or meat pellet. Chicken scratch is not a complete feed. Fresh food is the name of the game in healthy birds. Add fruits, veg, grasses (pasture) and access to bugs!!

Laying birds should not be raised with meat birds: they eat at different rates and are eating for different purposes.

Health and Disease: Generally, the problems that face chickens are disease and predators. Common diseases include coccidia parasites and respiratory disease, both bacterial and viral. Moving chickens to fresh ground frequently reduces transmission of all of these diseases, reduces feed costs because they will browse the new forage and bugs, reduces need to clean (CHICKENS REQUIRE VERY CLEAN CONDITIONS) because you do not have to be as careful about removing manure, and will fertilize your land. Keeping your birds warm enough and with enough ventilation will help reduce respiratory disease. Get in the habit of watching your chickens. Look for discharge from the nares on top of the beak and goopy eyes. Isolate sick animals immediately and take a fresh look at conditions in the coop.

- Never house chickens with turkeys: chickens commonly carry histomonas which can infect the turkeys!

Housing: Predators are the next large problem and electric mesh will nearly eliminate dogs, foxes, etc. The chicks need to be several weeks old before they can go in mesh (the holes are large enough that chicks can escape). Laying birds also can live in mesh, but grow slowly and need to be large enough that they can not escape the mesh.

A "chicken tractor" is a great way to get laying birds onto fresh ground and is a similar laying bird equivalent to the electric mesh for meat birds.

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All birds on pasture will need some sort of shelter, preferably portable, all the times. They also need fresh water, cleaned daily, all the time.

Resources: A really good website for pastured poultry products is Premier 1 (<http://www.premier1supplies.com>). You can search this site for excellent information and lots of the supplies that you may need. This site was recommended to me by a client who raises chickens. A wonderful book written by Vermonter Jennifer Megyesi is *The Joy of Keeping Chickens: The Ultimate Guide to Raising Poultry for Fun or Profit*.