



## A GUIDE TO SUCCESSFUL CHICKEN OWNERSHIP

Owning a few chickens can be a very rewarding and enjoyable experience, here a few notes for the first time chicken owner to keep your new arrivals happy and healthy.

***Please be aware that local authorities can have bye laws preventing the keeping of certain animals – please check this before purchasing your new flock!***

### **Sourcing**

To avoid health problems it is advisable to only buy new birds from a reputable source. Sales and markets are sadly a good way of bringing disease into an existing or new flock. Seeing the new birds in their original surroundings is recommended as it will give a general idea of the health status of the flock you are buying from. Only buy healthy, well grown animals. If new animals are being added to an existing flock it is sensible to keep them separate for 2-3 weeks and worm them at this time. This allows any diseases they are carrying to come to light before they mix with any of your own birds.

When **introducing new birds** to your flock bear in mind that chickens have a strict hierarchy which will be upset by this. If possible moving all chickens to temporary accommodation will ease the transition as no one will have an established territory. If this is not an option, put fencing between them for 2-3 weeks to gradually get the birds used to each other. Introducing new birds at night so they all wake up together in the morning is unlikely to work. It is equally important if re-introducing a sick bird – never reintroduce one bird to the rest of the flock, introduce to a third of the flock first before adding in the others. If introducing birds is not done carefully fights will occur – once a hen has a wound the rest are attracted to it and will peck at her until she dies.

Chickens are now very popular and there are many backyard flocks – please consider if you go from your chickens to visit someone else's that you can take disease with you. It is advisable to disinfect boots and avoid sharing equipment with other poultry owners unless it has been thoroughly disinfected. Keep feed in a secure place so other animals can't contaminate it.

If you are rescuing **ex-battery hens** that have lived in a temperature controlled house all their lives remember that they will be susceptible to extremes of temperature ie cold, rain, heat. It is also worth remembering that having been pushed hard from an early age their life expectancy is less than a chicken which has not come from a battery farm.

### **Housing**

Chickens will need a hen house in order to provide protection from the elements and predators and to allow laying and roosting. Chickens require approx 30cmx 30cm space each - there are now many arks available which are purpose designed but a garden shed can easily be adapted as a good hen house.

Nestboxes should also be provided, these are best in the lowest and darkest part of the house and should be filled with straw or shavings – hay can go mouldy and cause respiratory problems. They should be cleaned out weekly. Virkon is a good disinfectant to use.

Chickens also require perches, these need to be higher than the nestboxes as chickens like to roost in the highest place. They also need to be rounded as square perches can damage the chickens' feet. In order to exclude predators, mesh should be placed across windows and ventilation areas.

Chickens will moult once a year. During this time they can look very sorry for themselves and will go off lay. It usually takes 3-4 weeks before they have a full shiny set of feathers again. Wing clipping can be undertaken if required to prevent chickens flying out of pens or roosting in trees – this will need to be repeated yearly after each moult.

### **Nutrition**

Good quality feed is required for egg production which is best given in the form of layers' pellets. Corn can be fed as a treat but wheat is better than maize. Maize is very high in energy and can lead to an increased incidence of feather pecking.

Clean fresh water should be available at all times and it is important to check water drinkers in winter to ensure they are not frozen. To keep plastic water drinkers clean it is useful to use cider vinegar (10ml vinegar: 500ml water) in the drinker for one week in the month. Grit should also be provided ad lib to assist in digesting food, limestone grit or oyster shell will help in the formation of egg shells during laying.

Chickens will destroy a grass run by pulling up the roots, grazing will therefore need to be rotated or chicken wire on the bottom of the run will allow them to only take the top shoots leaving roots undisturbed. Wood chip or gravel is a suitable substrate for a run if required but don't use bark as it can harbor fungal diseases.

Picking nettles and hanging them in the chicken run is a great way of enriching their space and can also be a good way of keeping early rising chickens amused in the summer until they are let out! Be careful if chickens are free-range that there are no poisonous plants accessible – yew is particularly dangerous as unlike other poisonous plants it is apparently very tasty.

***PLEASE BE AWARE THAT FEEDING KITCHEN SCRAPS TO CHICKENS IS ILLEGAL DUE TO THE INCREASED RISK OF SALMONELLA***

### **Laying**

Chickens should reach the point of lay between 18-26 weeks depending on the breed and eggs can be expected 2-4 weeks later. However any upset to the routine may cause them to stop laying for a few weeks and if any oddly shaped eggs are noted it is definitely advisable to talk to a vet as this can be an early sign of some serious diseases. It takes chickens 25 hours to produce an egg so one egg a day from every chicken is unrealistic!

### **Health Care**

Monitoring your flock for any signs of disease and seeking veterinary advice is essential. It is essential that you regularly handle your chickens so you can appreciate if any weight loss is occurring. Some diseases of chickens such as Salmonella are infectious to humans. Therefore strict precautions should be taken, such as washing hands after handling poultry. It is also worthwhile keeping a record in a medicine book of any products used to treat the chickens.

Any signs of ill health are worth discussing with a veterinary surgeon as suspicion of some diseases is notifiable to DEFRA by law. Avian influenza is one such disease and any high, rapid and unexplained mortality and a severe drop in egg production must be investigated. Helpful information regarding diseases control and surveillance for any of the notifiable diseases can be found at [www.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/farmanimal/poultry/index.htm](http://www.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/farmanimal/poultry/index.htm)

Mycoplasma is a very common infection circulating in many flocks which is seen as intermittent snuffly/respiratory problems. Antibiotic treatment can alleviate clinical signs but birds will often still carry the virus and it will remain in the flock. If no new birds are entering then good husbandry and high quality feeding will limit outbreaks but birds from suspected Mycoplasma infected flocks should not be sold on and new stock should be quarantined. If young birds are exposed they will acquire a certain amount of immunity but can still show signs if challenged with other diseases.

### Vaccinations

A wide range of vaccines are available and used in commercial poultry operations. **Ex-battery hens will have been vaccinated as chicks and many vaccines last for life.** Other small backyard flocks are probably low risk for many of the diseases so if deciding whether or not to vaccinate your chickens against a disease the following should be taken into consideration:

- whether new birds are being introduced to the flock
- whether the flock has had disease problems in the past
- danger of disease spread from adjacent farm or wild birds

If your flock is low risk for all of the above then vaccination may not be required. However if any of the following apply then vaccination should be considered. There is also always a risk from wild birds carrying the disease.

- birds regularly leave the flock for shows,
- new birds are regularly bought in
- there have been disease problems in the past
- there is a danger of disease spreading from adjacent farms

A complete list of vaccines available follows, to discuss your flocks requirements please call the surgery.

<b>Mareks Disease</b>	- Widespread worldwide - Very infectious herpes virus	Injection at day-old, one-off dose
<b>Newcastle Disease &amp; Infectious Bronchitis</b>	- IB widespread - ND sporadic outbreaks in wild birds/small flocks > high mortality	A couple of oral/eye drop doses of live vaccine, then booster injection.
<b>Gumboro (IBD)</b>	Widespread	Oral/eye drop at 3 & 4 wks (live vaccine) Live vaccine repeat every 10 wks or switch to annual inactivated vaccine
<b>Salmonella/E.coli</b>	Zoonosis – human health implications of handling carrier birds/eggs	Avian freeze-dried gut flora, delivered as water spray at day-old.
<b>Coccidiosis</b>	Only if a known problem	At any age
<b>Infectious Laryngotracheitis</b>	Only if known problem	! Will pass infection to unvaccinated birds in close contact
<b>Mycoplasma</b>	only if known problem	

### **Worming**

Chickens should be wormed at least twice a year to protect from intestinal and tracheal parasites. This is available as an in feed product which requires feeding for 7 days. Please contact the surgery for more information.

### **Ectoparasites**

It is important to check chickens regularly for signs of lice/mites which can be brought in by wild birds.

Lice are visible to the naked eye and louse powder will usually sort the problem but heavy infestations may require a veterinary product.

Red mite is very common, these parasites live in the hen house and suck blood from chickens at night. Control involves both the house and chickens – the house should be thoroughly cleaned and a blow torch used in cracks/crevices and then sprayed with a suitable product. In heavy outbreaks birds may need to be treated also, please call the surgery for advice.

Northern fowl mites also suck blood but live on the bird so the effects are seen far sooner, again a vet will be happy to advise about treatment.

It is worth remembering that any product used to treat disease in chickens will have withdrawal period so eggs from affected birds should not be eaten for a certain period of time. The vet will advise as to this when treatment is dispensed.

**For any further information regarding your flock please contact us. The practice is always happy to produce flock health plans tailored to your own system or to provide further information on any aspect of flock health.**