

Animal Welfare Foundation

www.bva-awf.org.uk

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Keeping pet chickens

A PROSPECTIVE OWNER'S GUIDE



General information

The popularity of keeping backyard chickens as pets is growing rapidly. The availability of relatively cheap and compact chicken housing means that even the smallest of suburban gardens can now be home to a couple of chickens and the owner can be rewarded with fresh eggs at the breakfast table.

The five welfare needs

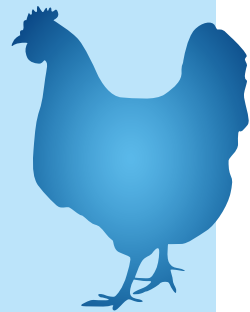
The idea of freshly laid eggs from your own chickens for breakfast is a wonderful idea. However, you must also consider the welfare of your pets. Recent animal welfare legislation (The Animal Welfare Act 2006 and the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006) introduced something called the 'duty of care'. This means that we must, by law, not only prevent our pets from suffering, but we must provide them with the things they need to make them happy and healthy. This is good news for our pets!

The first thing to do is try to think of all the things that can affect whether our pets are happy or not. A useful approach is to think about the 'five welfare needs'. These are a list of five things which all animals need to be healthy and happy and which, under the new laws, all owners need to provide for the pets they keep.

Five welfare needs:

1. Environment— a suitable place to live
2. Diet— the right food in the right amounts
3. Behaviour— being able to behave normally
4. Company— for animals that need to live together
5. Health— protecting your pet from pain, suffering, injury and disease

Before you decide to buy your chickens, you must first consider whether you can meet their five welfare needs.



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Housing your chickens

Chicken houses come in all shapes, sizes and qualities, so you should seek expert advice, from your vet or via specialist magazines, before purchasing the house. General principles are that it should be predator-proof, adequately ventilated and contain sufficient perches and nestboxes for the number of birds.

How often the chicken house needs cleaning out will depend on the type of house, the number of chickens you have and the type of bedding material used. However, it is important to make sure that droppings and soiled bedding are removed and replaced regularly to prevent disease.

As well as having a secure house to go into at night, your chickens will need to have access to an open area of grass and soil. Chickens are at their happiest scratching in the grass and soil, looking for things to eat. Likewise, there

is something very pleasing and relaxing about watching your chickens behaving naturally. However, your chickens can easily cause damage to your garden, so you may wish to limit their access to the more established areas of grass and plant life using plastic fencing—but remember they can fly over low fencing with ease.

If you have areas intended for planting, your chickens will help prepare the soil, keep harmful bugs at bay and fertilize it at the same time.

Sourcing your chickens

Before you buy your chickens, make a start by doing some research on how to look after them and seek advice from your vet or a poultry expert. Husbandry and welfare guidelines can be accessed at www.poultryclub.org

Chickens can be purchased locally, often through a local newspaper, from a registered

breeder or via advertisements in specialist poultry magazines. You will need to think carefully about what type of chickens you want to keep and consider how much space you have available for your chickens—for example you may consider choosing bantams, which are smaller in size. Again, you can seek expert advice to help you decide.



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Choosing a breed

A popular way of starting with chickens now is to 'rescue' battery hens. These are hens which are near the end of their laying life, being replaced by a younger flock. They arrive with few feathers and no knowledge of free-range and it warms the heart to see them discovering a new way of living. As they are already older birds, however, they may not live as long as chickens from other sources.



Commercial hybrids (or ex-battery hens)

- Lots of eggs
- Same colours and patterns
- Often need replacing after a couple of years
- Cheapest
- May not be very hardy

Free-range hybrids

- Good numbers of eggs
- Can get different colours
- Usually live a year or two longer than commercial hybrids
- More expensive
- Hardier

Pure breeds

- Some eggs, most of the year
- Different colours and patterns
- Live four to seven years
- Most expensive
- Hardest



Other people buy chickens at 'point of lay', which means they are about to start laying their first eggs, usually around 16–18 weeks old. Remember to ask if the chickens have been vaccinated against the major chicken diseases before you buy them.

Your chickens should start to lay eggs once they have settled in to their home, although the eggs may be a little smaller at first. Four chickens will keep a family of four in eggs, plus some left over,

so only buy as many chickens as you need. Eggs should be collected at least once daily. **Remember to wash hands afterwards.**

As winter approaches, many breeds of chicken will have a natural rest period in order to moult and re-grow their feathers and generally recover from the work of egg production. Be prepared for this respite and for going back to buying eggs for a while.



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Feeding your chickens

In order to produce good-quality, healthy eggs, chickens need to have a regular supply of nutritious food as well as vitamins and minerals. This is best supplied through feeding proprietary chicken layer pellets, together with grains such as whole wheat, plus grit for digestion. You should also ensure your chickens are fed the right food for their age. You can buy suitable feeders, water bowls and food through an animal feed merchant and they will be able to advise you. It is illegal to feed chickens scraps which have come from your own kitchen: this is to prevent disease. You can feed your hens surplus greens directly from your vegetable garden, though. Finally, you must ensure that your chickens are given fresh food and water every day.

General husbandry

Good animal husbandry and welfare is an essential part of keeping chickens. This means providing suitable food and housing which must be cleaned out regularly but also observing their behaviour, looking out for signs of disease and seeking veterinary advice if necessary. Taking the time to watch your chickens is part of the fun of keeping them and is a good way of spotting signs of disease early. It is important to worm your hens with a licensed wormer two to three times a year depending on how much space they have. Your vet can advise on this.

Some of the common signs of disease in backyard chickens are:

- Coughing/sneezing/runny eye(s)
- Listless/ruffled feathers/eyes closed
- Decreased egg production/loss of weight



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- Excessive feather loss, except during moult
- Lame leg/dropped wing, loose droppings

If you have reason to think that there is something wrong, or the chickens have obvious signs of disease such as sneezing or they suddenly stop producing eggs, consult your vet as soon as possible. Your vet is the best qualified person to give advice on chicken health and welfare, and on issues such as vaccination.

The key points

First of all, consider carefully whether you have the time and commitment to look after chickens; it's a 365-days-a-year job, but you will need to organize friends or neighbours to look after the hens on a daily basis if you need to go away.

- Remember the Duty of Care.
- Get all the housing and equipment in place before buying the chickens.
- Research the basics of chicken husbandry.
- Buy your chickens from a reputable source, preferably a single one.
- Keep any new additional/replacement chickens separate (quarantined) for two to three weeks to look for signs of disease.

- Enjoy observing your chickens, which helps spot any disease signs early.
- Consult your veterinary surgeon if your chickens appear ill.
- Enjoy those lovely fresh eggs!



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Further information links

- Directgov's *Keeping chickens: a beginner's guide*
- British Veterinary Zoological Society—a useful resource for owners looking for a vet experienced with poultry, www.bvzs.org



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Common chicken questions

Q Do I need a cockerel in order to get eggs from my hens?

A No, you do not need a cockerel and in any case, the noise from one is likely to upset your neighbours.

Q Can I handle my hens?

A Your hens will become very tame and won't mind being handled but it must be done properly. Both hands should be gently placed around the wings and body with the bird facing you. Lift up and transfer the weight to your outstretched palm, her legs held between your first/second and third/fourth fingers. The other hand is placed over her back to balance her. Take the weight on a forearm and hold her close, her head pointing towards the armpit, leaving the other hand free to stroke or inspect the bird. It is important to be firm with the legs but not to squeeze the body tightly as this may temporarily impair her breathing.

Q Will my dog or cat harm my hens?

A Both of these are predators so should be supervised if allowed to mix with the hens, but preferably keep them separate.

Q What happens if foxes come in my garden?

A You have a duty of care to keep predators away from your hens which is mainly achieved with secure fencing and housing. This includes foxes and other vermin such as rats and mice. Birds such as carrion crows and magpies should also be prevented from accessing the hens' feeder and drinker as they can transmit disease.



Always wash your hands after handling your chickens

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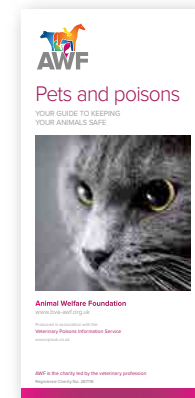
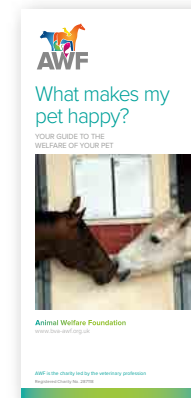
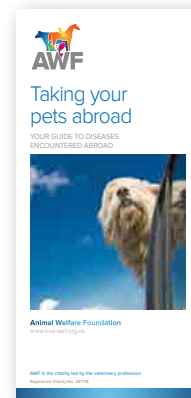
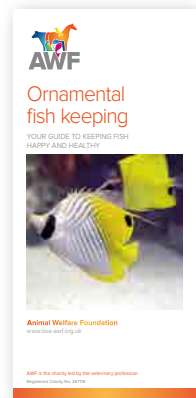
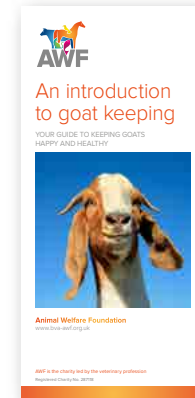
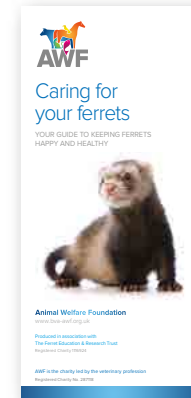
Animal Welfare Foundation

AWF is the charity led by the veterinary profession. We are committed to improving the welfare of all animals through veterinary science, education and debate.

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