

A CHICKEN'S FIVE BASIC NEEDS



A Holistic Approach to Physical and Mental Health

By Tamsin Cooper

Chickens are sensitive to their environment, motivations, and sense of well-being. Happy chickens cope better with changes and challenges, whereas distressed birds may easily go downhill.

Suitable Environment

Good enclosures provide shelter, food and water, but also space for different activities.

- Provide shelters or vegetation, such as trees, bushes, or willow screens to allow chickens to hide.
- Perches enable them to feel safe and comfortable at night. Chicks need early access to low perches.
- Offer several, separate nesting locations, and change the bedding frequently.
- Hygiene is important. Frequently move penned chickens to fresh ground.

Suitable Diet

Chickens need the correct feed for their stage of life, as well as their production and activity levels. Variety alleviates boredom.

- Free-ranging chickens often meet most needs themselves, but ensure that productive layers get enough calcium and vitamin D for shell production.
- Chicks and pullets need high protein diets, but too much calcium is detrimental to bone growth.
- Meat birds put on weight quickly

and may need encouragement to work for their food to stay active and healthy.

- Birds require tiny stones or grit to grind down grain in their crops. At range, chickens normally find these themselves, but penned birds need grit supplements if fed grain.

- Chickens need water for digestion, nutrition, and heat dissipation. Keep a constant supply available during daytime.

Opportunities to Express Normal Behavior

Inability to perform natural behaviors may cause frustration and distress. These include dust-bathing, nesting, foraging, preening, stretching, wing-flapping, perching, and sleeping. Enclosures restricted in height, space, or means to practice behaviors can lead to abnormal, and sometimes harmful, behavior.

Essentials include nesting materials, dry dust for bathing, and fresh land to scratch up and find food. Most chickens prefer to forage for food than feed directly from a trough.

Hens with insufficient space or opportunity to forage may resort to feather

pecking. As chickens are attracted to blood, skin damage may result in cannibalism. Over-stocked or barren coops may lead to such issues.

Appropriate Companionship

Chickens need to do some tasks together, such as preening, foraging, and dust-bathing, because they were dangerous occupations in the wild. However, they are not keen on unfamiliar birds and aggression will break out until they establish a new pecking order. Introduce new birds carefully.

Good Health

Spot and eradicate issues early with regular health checks and preventive healthcare.

Heritage or backyard breeds enjoy a naturally hardy, resilient, and longer life than production breeds. Broilers need more rest, have larger appetites, are prone to overheating, and suffer structural problems from bones that cannot support their weight. Commercial layers are prone to developing egg peritonitis and osteoporosis, and are prone to fractures when jumping down from perches.

Chickens feel pain and suffering as much as any other animal. A chicken becomes immobile from fear when hung upside down or on her back. It may be easier for us to handle birds in this way, but it is extremely stressful for the bird. At the end of life, provide the least stressful or painful experience possible. If culling is involved, neck dislocation is the quickest method. Strangulation or cut throats are slower and more traumatic.

Birds' welfare can be upset in more ways than we realize. Allowing them to be the birds that they are will help them to live happier, healthier lives.