

Raising Baby Chicks 101:

How to Care for Chicks

Getting started with chicks

Live poultry may have Salmonella germs in their droppings and on their bodies (feathers, feet, and beaks) even when they appear healthy and clean. The germs can also get on cages, coops, hay, plants, and soil in the area where the birds live and roam. Additionally, the germs can be found on the hands, shoes, and clothing of those who handle the birds or work or play where they live and roam. People become infected with Salmonella when they put their hands or other things that have been in contact with feces in or around their mouth. Young children are especially at risk for illness because their immune systems are still developing and because they are more likely than others to put their fingers or other items into their mouths. It is important to wash your hands immediately after touching poultry or anything in the area where they live and roam, because the germs on your hands can easily spread to other people or things.

Care for newborn chicks

Set up a brooding area. When raising just a few chicks (30 or less) use a large box with walls at least 18-inches high and place the box in a safe area away from drafts and household pets. Use a screen or a towel to cover the box. For larger numbers, a metal stock tank can be used in an enclosed, draft free outbuilding. Do not use a plastic bin as a brooder area. The brooder lamp can melt the plastic, fall into the pine shavings and start a fire. Chicks need one-half square foot of space for the first two weeks. They grow fast and after two weeks, increase to one square foot per bird.

Keep chicks warm

Chicks need to be kept in a warm place until they are fully feathered. The temperature at the bottom of the brooding area should be 95-100 degrees for the first two weeks and then reduced 5 degrees each week until chicks are a month old. Use a brooder lamp (we recommend a red bulb) clipped over one side of the brooding area so the chicks can choose whether to be under the light or not. If chicks are crowded together directly under the heat source, then they are cold. If they are around the edges of the brooding area, then they are too hot. Adjust the height of the lamp accordingly and give them enough room to move in and out of the light to regulate their body temperatures.

Bedding for baby chicks

Provide bedding to catch and absorb chick droppings and change this daily. Line the floor of the box with sheets of newspaper and then cover it with pine shavings. Once soiled, then just roll up the paper, pine shavings and all, and throw it away. If using newspaper, make sure to cover with bedding such as 2-3" of pine shavings, chopped

straw, oat hulls or ground cobs (not finely ground), so the surface won't be too slippery for the chicks. Without firm footing their legs will not develop correctly, making them spraddle-legged.

Food and water for baby chicks

Set out water and chick starter feed in separate containers. Keep food and water clean and free of droppings. If chicks are not drinking, dip the chicks' beaks in the water to get them started. A chick fountain is by far the best way to give chicks water. Saucers or other make-shift containers spill easily making the brooder area wet and unsanitary. Never let the chicks go without water. For feed, start chicks on a 20% protein (24% protein for broilers) starter ration. At 8-10 weeks old, switch chicks to 18-19% chick grower.

Picking problems in baby chicks

Birds between the ages of one and three weeks old may start picking around the tail stub, wing bow or neck areas. If this happens, make sure there is good ventilation in the building. Consult your veterinarian if the picking persists.

Other considerations for raising baby chicks

Chicks love to roost when they're resting. Provide roosting poles or stacks of bricks so chicks have a place to perch a few inches off the ground to keep them from roosting on the waterer and feeder. As the chicks start to feather, on warm days put them in a wire pen outside for short periods of time in a draft free area. Keep an eye on them and provide a tray of sand so they can dust. As you work with the chicks, remember that slow movements are less apt to frighten them. Thoroughly wash your hands with soap and water after handling or working around the chicks. Salmonella, a common cause of food borne illness, can be spread by direct contact with animals that carry the bacteria. Hygiene is very important to keep your birds, you and your family healthy.

Safe handling of chicks

- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water immediately after touching live poultry or anything in the area where they live and roam.
- Avoid touching your mouth before washing your hands.
- Use hand sanitizer if soap and water are not readily available.
- Adults should supervise hand washing for young children.
- Wash hands after removing soiled clothes and shoes.
- Do not let children younger than 5 years of age handle or touch chicks, ducklings, or other live poultry without supervision.
- Do not eat or drink in the area where the birds live or roam.
- If you collect eggs from the hens, thoroughly cook them, as Salmonella can pass from healthy looking hens into the interior of normal looking eggs.
- Do not let live poultry inside the house, in bathrooms, or especially in areas where food or drink is prepared, served, or stored, such as kitchens, or outdoor patios.

- If you have free-roaming live poultry, assume where they live and roam is contaminated.
- Clean equipment and materials associated with raising or caring for live poultry, such as cages or feed or water containers, outside the house, not inside.