**YVCipedia POULTRY**

Chicken Care Sheet

## **Species Overview**

Backyard chickens are enjoying a well-deserved renaissance, appreciated not just for their eggs but for their charm, social intelligence, and surprising trainability. Though technically “poultry,” many backyard hens are treated more like pets—with names, routines, and favorite treats.

At YVC, we find that with thoughtful care, chickens can be healthy, engaging companions. Most backyard flocks include hardy breeds like Buff Orpingtons, Rhode Island Reds, or Barred Rocks. While their personalities vary by breed and individual, they’re consistently curious, expressive, and responsive to their environment.

## **Housing & Environment**

A well-ventilated, secure coop and access to an outdoor area are essential for both health and happiness. Chickens need space to move, perch, dust bathe, and exhibit normal behaviors.

We recommend a minimum of 4 square feet of indoor coop space per bird, and at least 8–10 square feet of run space outside. Nesting boxes (one per 3–4 hens) should be clean and easy to access, while roosting bars should be higher than the boxes to encourage proper perching.

At YVC, we advise using hardware cloth (not chicken wire) to protect against predators, and ensuring the coop has good airflow without being drafty. Chickens can tolerate a wide range of temperatures, but do best with stable conditions and dry, clean bedding. During the winter, supplemental lighting can help maintain consistent laying patterns, as most hens respond to 14–16 hours of daylight.

## **Diet & Nutrition**

Proper nutrition not only supports egg production but also strengthens the immune system, feathers, and overall vitality. Chickens are omnivores with a natural drive to forage, so variety matters—but balance matters more.

At YVC, we recommend a daily diet that includes:

* **80–90% high-quality commercial layer pellets or crumbles** (16–18% protein) as the primary foundation.
* **5–10% fresh vegetables** like leafy greens, carrots, or squash. Occasional fruits like berries or melon are fine in moderation.
* **Under 5% scratch grains or treats**, used thoughtfully to avoid obesity and nutritional imbalance.

Calcium is especially critical for laying hens. Even with a good base diet, we advise offering free-choice **crushed oyster shell** or a comparable calcium supplement. **Grit** should also be available, particularly for birds without access to natural soil or gravel.

Fresh, clean water must be available at all times—heated in winter to prevent freezing. Avoid feeding salty table scraps, spoiled food, avocado, chocolate, and raw beans, as these can be harmful.

## **Behavior & Handling**

Chickens are social, routine-driven animals with a well-defined pecking order. Most hens become quite tame with regular, gentle handling and can even learn simple commands. They communicate through vocalizations, body posture, and behavior changes—many of which owners quickly learn to recognize.

When handling chickens, it’s best to scoop from underneath and support both the breast and feet to prevent flapping and panic. At YVC, we encourage clients to interact with their flock regularly to help build trust, monitor for early signs of illness, and keep birds sociable.

Introducing new chickens to a flock should be done gradually to prevent bullying and stress. Quarantine is always recommended before adding new birds.

## **Enrichment**

Chickens aren’t just scratching in the dirt—they’re exploring, evaluating, and learning from their surroundings. Enrichment helps prevent boredom and associated issues like feather pecking, aggression, or pacing.

We suggest offering varied opportunities for movement and stimulation: hanging cabbage heads or treat balls, access to foraging space, different surfaces for perching and walking, and novel items rotated into their environment. Chickens particularly enjoy dust bathing and will often create dedicated hollows in loose dirt or sand to clean and cool themselves.

Even simple items like logs, stumps, or platforms can provide hours of entertainment and exercise.

## **Health & Veterinary Care**

Though often overlooked, chickens benefit from regular veterinary care—especially pet flocks. At YVC, we recommend **annual wellness exams and fecal testing** for at least one bird from the flock.

Some of the more common issues we see include:

* **Egg binding or reproductive tract disease**, especially in high-production layers
* **Mites and lice**, particularly in dirty or overcrowded conditions
* **Respiratory infections**, often related to dust, ammonia buildup, or poor ventilation
* **Bumblefoot**, a painful infection caused by injury or poor substrate
* **Obesity or nutritional deficiencies**, often from excess treats or poor diet balance

Signs of illness may include reduced appetite, changes in egg production, lethargy, abnormal droppings, nasal discharge, or a hunched posture. Because chickens are prey animals, they hide illness well—early detection makes a big difference.

A separate space for quarantine or treatment is highly recommended for any backyard flock.

## **Facts & FAQs**

* Hens lay eggs without a rooster, though fertilized eggs require one.
* Chickens can live 6–10 years with good care, though egg laying declines with age.
* Many chickens can recognize individual people and respond to routines.
* Chickens enjoy music, mirrors, and gentle interaction—and some even enjoy being held!
* Eggshell color varies by breed, not by nutrition.

## **Supplies Checklist**

* Secure, weatherproof coop with roosting bars and nesting boxes
* Covered outdoor run or safe free-range area
* Layer pellets or crumbles with calcium supplement
* Fresh vegetables and limited scratch grains
* Clean waterers (heated in winter)
* Bedding (pine shavings or straw; avoid cedar)
* Grit and oyster shell available free-choice
* Carrier or crate for vet visits
* Quarantine setup for new or ill birds
* Enrichment items (perches, hanging vegetables, dust bathing area)

*Yarmouth Veterinary Center*