**YVCipedia POULTRY**

Turkey Care Sheet

## **Species Overview**

Turkeys, while commonly associated with agriculture, are increasingly kept in backyard flocks for their unique personalities, impressive displays, and egg or meat production. The two most commonly kept types are the broad-breasted domestic turkey (raised primarily for meat and unable to reproduce naturally) and the smaller, heritage breeds like the Bourbon Red, Royal Palm, and Narragansett, which are more active, self-sufficient, and long-lived.

At YVC, we find that turkeys can be surprisingly social and engaging animals when raised with proper care. They’re sensitive to changes in environment and nutrition and tend to form strong bonds with flockmates—or occasionally their human caretakers. Healthy turkeys can live anywhere from 5–10 years, with heritage breeds often outliving commercial lines.

## **Housing & Environment**

Turkeys need ample space, good ventilation, and protection from predators. They are more sensitive to cold and wet conditions than chickens, especially when young, and require dry, draft-free shelter with access to the outdoors.

We recommend a secure coop with at least **8–10 square feet per bird inside** and **20–25 square feet per bird in the run or yard**. Provide well-bedded flooring (such as straw or pine shavings), raised roosts for nighttime perching, and nesting areas if hens are kept for eggs. Outdoor runs should be fenced and ideally covered—turkeys can fly short distances and may attempt to roost in trees if not enclosed.

Good drainage is key—wet or muddy conditions are a common contributor to respiratory illness and foot infections. Shelter should allow for shade in summer and warmth in winter. If kept near chickens, it’s important to understand turkeys’ higher susceptibility to certain pathogens, particularly **Histomoniasis (blackhead disease)**.

## **Diet & Nutrition**

Turkeys require more protein than chickens, especially during growth and early laying stages. At YVC, we recommend species-specific feeds and attention to calcium and vitamin needs, depending on age and purpose.

A balanced turkey diet generally includes:

* **Starter feed** with 24–28% protein for poults (first 6–8 weeks)
* **Grower feed** with 18–20% protein from 8–16 weeks
* **Maintenance or breeder feed** (14–16% protein) for adults not being raised for meat
* **Access to grit** for digestion and **oyster shell or calcium supplement** for laying hens
* **Greens, vegetables, and insects** (mealworms, earthworms) for enrichment

Avoid feeding moldy or spoiled food—turkeys are especially vulnerable to mycotoxins. Always provide **clean, fresh water**, changed daily.

## **Behavior & Handling**

Turkeys are inquisitive and expressive, often displaying a range of vocalizations, body postures, and color changes of their head and wattle. Males, or toms, in particular are known for fanning their tails, puffing up, and strutting—especially during mating season or when asserting dominance.

While often docile, turkeys can become territorial or aggressive, especially if not handled from a young age. Slow, gentle interaction fosters trust. At YVC, we recommend raising turkeys in small groups with minimal crowding to avoid behavioral issues. Mixing aggressive toms or overcrowding hens can lead to pecking injuries or stress-related problems.

If you’re keeping both sexes, maintain a ratio of **1 tom to 4–6 hens** to avoid overbreeding or conflict.

## **Enrichment**

Mental and physical stimulation keeps turkeys healthy and calm. While they don’t typically enjoy toys in the way parrots do, they do benefit from environmental complexity and access to forage.

You can support enrichment through:

* Logs or platforms for perching and climbing
* Scattered grains or treats in bedding to encourage foraging
* Safe access to pasture or garden areas with supervision
* Occasional whole vegetables (like cabbage heads or squash) to peck at
* Visual stimulation like mirrors or hanging shiny objects in covered runs

They enjoy consistent routines and do best when handled gently and spoken to calmly.

## **Health & Veterinary Care**

Turkeys are prone to respiratory disease, nutritional deficiencies, and parasitic infections, particularly in damp or poorly ventilated housing. At YVC, we recommend **annual wellness exams and fecal testing**, with bloodwork or additional diagnostics based on clinical signs or flock health concerns.

Some common health concerns in turkeys include:

* **Blackhead disease (Histomoniasis)**—especially when co-housed with chickens
* **Mycoplasma and other respiratory illnesses**
* **Coccidiosis**, particularly in young poults
* **Bumblefoot**, resulting from poor flooring or overweight birds
* **Nutritional deficiencies**, especially vitamin E, selenium, or calcium
* **Reproductive issues** in hens kept for extended laying

Sudden lethargy, respiratory sounds, swelling of the head or wattle, lameness, or a change in droppings all warrant prompt evaluation. Due to their size and rapid decline with illness, early detection is especially important.

## **Facts & FAQs**

* Turkeys can fly short distances—heritage breeds may roost in trees if allowed
* Males can weigh over 25 lbs; females typically weigh 12–16 lbs depending on breed
* Despite their reputation, turkeys can be affectionate and enjoy gentle attention
* Blackhead disease is transmitted via a common intestinal worm in chickens
* Commercial broad-breasted turkeys cannot mate naturally due to body size

## **Supplies Checklist**

To properly care for turkeys, we recommend:

* Secure, well-ventilated coop (8–10 sq ft per bird minimum)
* Outdoor run or pasture space (20–25 sq ft per bird minimum)
* Turkey-specific starter/grower/maintenance feed
* Grit and oyster shell or other calcium source
* Roosting bars, hide areas, and dust-bathing spots
* Enrichment opportunities such as forage or raised platforms
* Covered shelter for inclement weather
* Clean water dispenser and spill-proof feed stations
* Annual exam and fecal test with avian-experienced veterinarian

*Yarmouth Veterinary Center*