



## Raising chickens begins with basics

**H**opeful chicken producers can feather their nest egg and have the enjoyment of raising their own animals by following some common-sense guidelines.

Do you want to raise chickens for egg production or meat? Chickens for laying eggs are layers, and those that produce meat are broilers.

Successful poultry producers take care of many details to ensure their animals are comfortable. Starting with healthy hatchlings and maintaining their health is extremely important. Hatchlings should be obtained from a reputable hatchery with a history of producing healthy birds

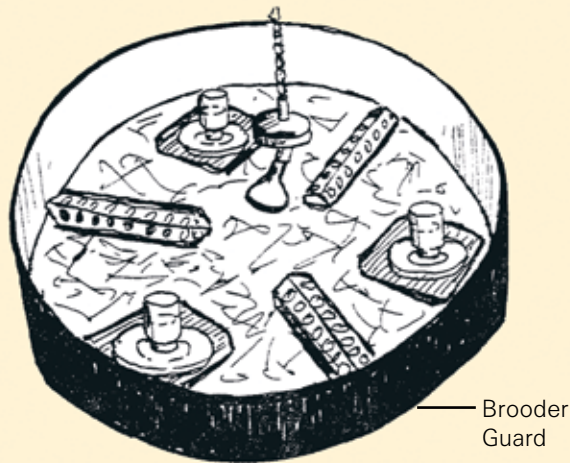
Identifying the difference between a healthy bird and an unhealthy bird is important. A healthy bird will be alert, bright eyed, and full breasted, and it will have erect posture, clean feathers, a bright and full comb and wattles (the skin on top of the head and under the chin), and clean nostrils. A healthy bird will drink plenty of water and eat with frequent eagerness. The stool (manure) will be moist and grayish in color with a white cap.

An unhealthy bird will have a decreased appetite and will not drink as much. It will also appear listless, depressed, shrunken, and dull eyed. The stool may be very dry and hard (constipation) or just the opposite – very watery and loose (diarrhea). If a bird appears to be sick, separate the sick animal from the other birds. After getting advice from a veterinarian or other professional, follow that advice very carefully.

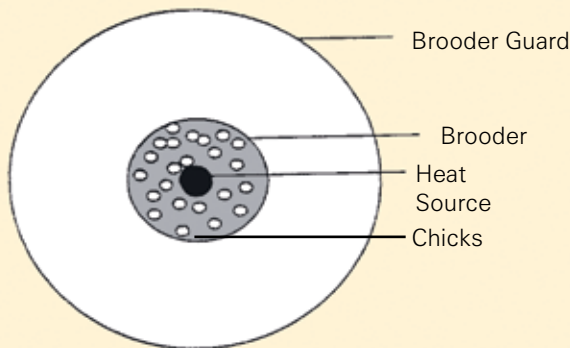
Most health problems can be avoided or kept to a minimum by following these five simple steps:

- \* Buy only healthy birds from healthy flocks.
- \* Keep vaccinations up to date.
- \* Clean coops at least once a week.
- \* Clean feeders and waterers at least once a week; twice a week is much better.
- \* Immediately remove and replace wet or dirty bedding.

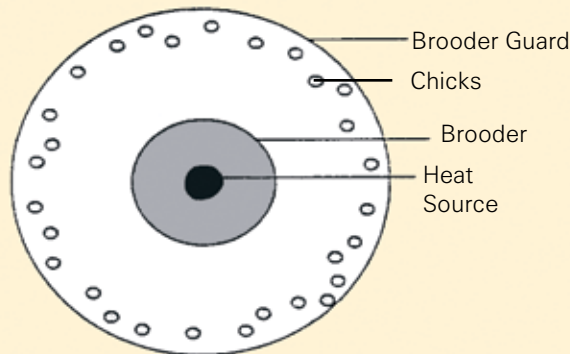
A bird needs a proper home (called a coop) as well as proper care, feeding, and watering. The



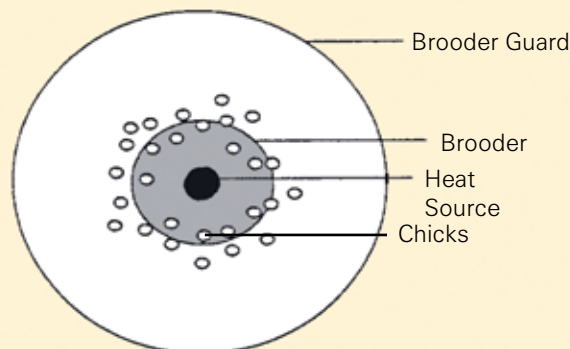
**Figure A – Brooder set-up recommendation**



**Figure B – Too cold**



**Figure C – Too hot**



**Figure D – Just right**

basic requirements of poultry housing are simple:

- \* Space for resting, feeding, watering, and movement.
- \* Protection and escape from the weather and from predators.
- \* Adequate ventilation to avoid stale air and moisture buildup.

Space requirements vary according to the species and type of bird. Smaller birds such as bantams require 2 to 3 square feet of floor space, and egg-production birds take about 3 square feet of floor space. Larger chicken breeds and ducks require 4 to 5 square feet of floor space. Large birds such as geese and turkeys need even more room.

Clean and disinfect a brooding house (a structure used to raise hatchlings before moved into a coop) and equipment before each new set of hatchlings arrives. Place 4 to 6 inches of bedding such as wood shavings, sawdust, chopped straw or similar materials in the brooder when it is dry.

A 250-watt infrared heat lamp 15 to 18 inches above the bedding easily provides heating. It should be turned on the day before the hatchlings arrive to allow time for temperature adjustments. Use a rope or chain to hang the heat lamp. The recommended temperature for the first few days is about 90 degrees. If hatchlings crowd under the heat lamp, they are cold. If they move away from the heat lamp, they are hot. If they are scattered and dispersed in the brooder, they are comfortable. Move the heat accordingly. **Figures B, C, and D illustrate each of these situations when viewed from above.** Decrease the temperature by 5 degrees after the first week, and then decrease it by 2 to 3 degrees every third or fourth day until the temperature is between 70 and 75 degrees.

Waterers and feeders should be alternately placed around the edge of the brooder and not placed directly under a heat lamp. Fill the feeders and waterers the day before the hatchlings arrive. **Figure A provides an illustration of a typical setup.**

Nutrition requirements are different for each type of bird. Pullets are female birds under 1 year old. Twenty percent is recommended for younger pullets (under 8 weeks old), and the guideline for older pullets (8 to 20 weeks old) is 16 percent.



The recommendation for laying hens is 15 percent protein. Broilers should receive feed with a protein content of at least 24 percent.

Hens and pullets lay more eggs as the hours of light increase. Use electric lighting to make chickens produce more eggs. Layers need about 15 hours of light per day (do not allow the light period to decrease). A 40-watt bulb will provide enough light for approximately 100 layers and enough light for brooders up to 20 square feet in size.

Pullets will start laying eggs at about 22 weeks old under normal conditions. Hens will average laying approximately 260 eggs per year.

In addition:

- Provide vitamins in the water. Commercial feed contains vitamins and minerals, but they should also be provided in the water because all birds, even sick ones, will drink water after they go off feed.
- Provide medications as needed. These are usually best given by adding them to water. Be sure to follow all label recommendations for medications.
- Gradually change from one ration to another ration specific to the animal and age. Mix them together (first more of the original and then more of the new one), and make the change over three to four days.
- Control rats and mice as much as possible since they can spread disease.
- Isolate a flock, limit visitors, and keep dogs, cats, and pets away from a coop.
- Only keep birds of a similar age together.

*Stephen Schafer is a 4-H youth development specialist with the University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service and can be reached at (307) 766-5027 or by e-mail at [sschafer@uwyo.edu](mailto:sschafer@uwyo.edu).*