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# Raising Turkeys

## Housing

It's best to raise turkeys indoors if you have the space, since there will be fewer problems with predators and bad weather. You'll need to have about six square feet of floor space per bird. A separate building or a spare room in a barn or garage will work equally well.

The next best method is a small shelter with an attached porch. A well-screened porch, off the ground, will help protect the birds from diseases. The floor of the porch may be covered by 1" x 1" wooden slats with one-inch spaces between them.

A third housing option is simply to let the turkeys roam in a fenced-in yard after they're two months of age. This option is most risky, as some turkeys may fly over the fence or predatory animals may break in to attack your turkeys.

## Brooding Turkeys

Baby turkeys are called poults. If you can, order your poults from an in-state hatchery. The less distance and time involved in transporting the poults, the better their condition will be on arrival.

Be prepared before the poults arrive. You may need to special-order a turkey starter feed ahead of time. Some feed companies don't handle any turkey feed — chick starter is a poor substitute. Other companies will get it for you only on special orders.

If you're planning to raise 10 or more poults, buy a 100-pound bag of turkey starter that contains medication to prevent *coccidiosis*, a common intestinal disease. Turkeys should develop immunity to *coccidiosis* while eating medicated starter feed.

Turkey poults are more difficult to get started correctly than baby chicks. They need a warm temperature of 100° F. two inches above the floor. Don't guess, keep a thermometer down with the poults for the first two to three weeks. You can drop the temperature five degrees each week. Place an 18-inch high cardboard ring around poults, 18 inches from the edge of the heat.

Use wood shavings for turkey litter. Do not use sawdust, as the poults may eat it and have digestive troubles. Do not place newspapers on top of the litter. Sliding on the paper can cause pulled tendons in the legs of young poults. It's best never to clean out the litter completely; simply remove wet or caked litter while periodically adding some dry shavings.

A red infrared heat lamp is ideal for brooding poults. Mount it in a porcelain socket attached to a heavy extension cord and hung by a chain, not just the cord. Suspend the bulb at least 18" above the floor and take pains to avoid contact with flammable materials. It's a good idea to hang a regular light bulb a few feet above the feed and water so the poults can see better for the first two to three days, as their vision is poor right after hatching.

To save some electrical costs, begin brooding your poults in a large cardboard carton (about three feet by five feet) in your home. In this way, you may be able to keep them warm enough with a 100-watt light bulb instead of the 250-watt heat lamp.

Spend some time with the poults for the first hour you have them to be sure they find the feed and water. It sometimes helps to dip their beaks in the water. Once turkey poults do start eating and drinking well, they usually grow without difficulty from then on.

Use a small one-gallon chick waterer. Open dishes or pans aren't good, since poults may fall in, get chilled and die. The bottom half of an egg carton makes a good starting feeder for several days. A metal or wooden feeder, well filled with feed should be put near the heat, also. Bright-colored marbles may help to attract poults to the feed and water.

You can remove the cardboard ring at 10 days of age and let the poults have use of the entire room. Don't leave open pails or boxes on the floor. Poults are very curious and have been known to jump into such a container - one on top of another. There should be nothing in the room with the poults besides the feed, water and heat. You can use a roost but it's not necessary.

Poults sometimes start to pick on each other badly enough to cause bleeding or even death. To prevent this, you may want to cut off one-half of the upper beak at 10 days of age with a dog toenail clipper. Trim beaks on a cool day, if possible.

The poults may need heat up to six weeks of age. Use common sense — if the weather is hot during the day, shut off the heat. If it cools down to the 30s and 40s at night, the birds will need extra heat. Always leave room for the poults to move away from the heat if it gets too hot.

## **Keep Them Growing**

When the turkeys reach six to eight weeks of age, you should start using a turkey growing ration that contains a preventive medication for blackhead disease. This disease may show up anywhere. Because chickens are highly resistant to this disease, blackhead can spread to turkeys from chicken manure. If the turkeys have no protection against this disease, they may all die. Be sure to check the fine print on the feed tag to see if the feed is medicated for blackhead.

A bird six weeks of age or older that dies rather suddenly or after looking droopy for one to two days should be cut open for a look at the liver. A liver with white or yellow spots is a sure sign of this disease.

Raise turkeys separately from chickens and avoid walking from chicken pens into turkey pens. There are other diseases besides blackhead that could be spread from chickens to turkeys.

As the poults grow taller and their necks get longer, raise the feeders and waterers off the floor or graduate the birds to larger equipment. The edge of the feeder trough should be at the level of the turkey's back. This will help keep the feed and water clean after the first week. Do not fill the feeders so full that feed is wasted on the floor. Feed makes very expensive litter.

You will find you need rugged feeders and waterers that aren't easily spilled. For the last couple months of their lives, turkeys are large, very strong animals.

Keep a container full of coarse sand or fine gravel the turkeys can eat whenever they wish. Birds that go outdoors will find their own grit on the ground.

Growing rations should be fed until the turkeys are within 3-4 weeks of slaughter. Use unmedicated finishing rations for the remaining weeks. Most turkeys reach their mature size in six months. During that time, you can plan on the toms eating nearly 100 pounds each and the hens nearly 60 pounds each.

If you have wondered about discerning sex of your birds, the toms will fluff out their feathers and start strutting at an early age. They gobble much more loudly than the quieter hens. Toms will also develop much more red skin or wattles on the front of their necks. After four months of age, the toms will be much larger than the hen turkeys.

If you have a garden, you'll find that turkeys enjoy eating lettuce leaves, overripe tomatoes or sweet corn, summer squash and some other items. Although modern turkey rations provide very well-balanced diets, your turkeys will welcome a few fresh vegetables from time to time.

Once you have stopped using heat for your turkeys, you do not need any more artificial light. The normal daylight of summer and fall is enough for good growth.

Turkeys nearing maturity in late fall can stand freezing temperatures without any trouble. Be sure, however, to provide them with plenty of clean, unfrozen drinking water every day.

### **Tips on Slaughtering\***

Remove feed at least 24 hours and water 12 hours before killing. If you plan to dry-pick the birds, be sure to stun them by sticking the brain through the cleft in the roof of the mouth or by a sharp blow on top of the head before bleeding them thoroughly.

If you use hot water to loosen the feathers, the temperature should be 140<sup>o</sup>F. Dip the bird for 30-45 seconds, then pluck rapidly. After plucking, singe the hair off with a blow torch or alcohol flame. Cut off the legs at the hock joints. Remove the head, then remove the neck from the backside, leaving the neck skin attached to the bird. Remove crop and neck tubes. Then, cut out the oil gland, cut around the vent and remove the insides. Save the heart, gizzard, liver and neck.

### **Final note**

Consult local zoning and building ordinances before beginning any household livestock operation. Laws and ordinances in some communities may restrict or prohibit such activities in your neighborhood.

Also, consider the impact of your home poultry operation on your neighbors. Use care in siting and constructing housing for your turkeys and develop a plan for manure management that will prevent odor and pollution problems.

*\* For a comprehensive online guide to home poultry slaughter, visit this University of Minnesota Extension Web site:*

<http://www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/livestocksystems/DI0701.html>

*Original fact sheet written by Extension poultry specialist Tom Danko; revised 12/01*

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