



## Producing Your Own Eggs



### UNH Cooperative Extension Programs

	Community and Economic Development
	Food and Agriculture ✓
	Natural Resources
	Youth and Family

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### Sources of Hens

Though it’s sometimes possible to buy five-month old pullets that are ready to start laying eggs, it’s more likely you’ll need to raise your own hens from baby chicks. In that case, you need to plan on a five-month growing period before you see any eggs. Chickens don’t start laying eggs until they are 21 weeks of age, and day length is a factor.

Leghorns or other chickens with white ear lobes, will lay white eggs. All other chickens lay a shade of brown, with the exception of some that lay blue eggs, like Araucanas or Ameraucanas, and green eggs like Easter Eggers.



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### Expected Results

Ten hens should lay about nine eggs per day once they all get started. Daily egg production can vary — conditions such as bad weather, dark days, severe cold, frozen water, predators and lack of feed will affect hens adversely and may reduce laying.

As hens age, they gradually lay fewer eggs. A 10-hen flock will ease off to six to seven eggs per day after 13 months of production. Over

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that period, each hen should produce 20 dozen eggs or more and eat 90-100 pounds of feed during the same time. By this age, birds should be allowed to molt to regrow a healthy set of feathers.

### **Housing**

Mature laying hens should have at least three square feet of floor space per bird. This could be a corner or room of a barn, or a small building by itself. In either case, have electricity available.

The chicken pen needs to be tight enough to keep out animal predators, yet not so tight as to interfere with good ventilation. There should be a door and at least one window, preferably on the south side of the coop. If the flock is housed in a confinement situation, fans should be installed for good air circulation and ventilation in the summer.

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If you prefer to let them outdoors during good weather, make a small, well-fenced yard. Remember, everything eats chicken so they are very vulnerable to predation. A roofed yard is best. In addition, if allowed to roam free, hens may lay eggs under buildings or out in the bushes.

### **Equipment**

A hen-size round metal hanging feeder, a metal trough work well to feed and water hens. Whatever type you choose, its design shouldn't allow the hens to climb in and scratch around to waste feed, or defecate in it and should be cleanable.

Purchased or homemade nesting boxes should allow one opening for every 4 hens.

Chickens have a natural instinct to roost. The perches of 2” x 2” lumber or equally thick branches attached to the walls about two feet, three feet, and four feet above the floor should be constructed. This tiered perch system allows for natural pecking order behavior. Dominant birds will roost on the top and most subordinate hens will roost on the lowest perch. You will need one linear foot of space per bird for roosting.



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Since hens' egg-producing hormones are triggered by light, provide at least 14 hours of total light daily from September 1 to May 1 with a 25-watt electric light bulb to keep your hens laying through the shorter days in winter. However, this will interfere with the birds' natural need and cycle of molting. If lights are not turned on, by October 31st the days will be short enough to cause the flock to stop laying eggs and lose their feathers. In about 6 weeks a much needed new set will have grown. Birds need a healthy set of feathers to cool them in the summer and insulate them from cold in the winter. Molting is the only way they can maintain a healthy set of feathers. After molting and feather regrowth is complete, light can be reintroduced SLOWLY to bring the birds back into lay. Consult your local Cooperative extension agent for more details on how to do this.

### **Feeding and Watering**

Buy a complete laying ration which consists of about 16-18 percent crude protein and 4 percent calcium. Store feed in rodent-proof containers in a cool, dry location to prevent nutrient losses. For ease of handling and freshness buy your feed in 50-pound bags for a small flock. Each bag should last two to three weeks for 10 hens. If you use the 50 pounds in less than two weeks, the feeding system is either allowing your hens to waste feed or there are other animals eating from your hens' feeder.

Keep feed in front of the hens most of the time. If they run out every day, they're probably not getting enough. Birds eat about ½ cup of feed per day, depending on size. It's good practice to let them empty the feeder for a few hours once a week so the feed doesn't become stale. At the other extreme, don't overfill the feeder to the point where feed is spilled onto the floor and wasted.

Don't feed extra cracked corn – this can unbalance the ration and increase the visceral fat in the birds, which can interfere with egg laying. You can feed some kitchen scraps, but care should be taken to make the scraps small enough to pass through the chickens' digestive system to get to the gizzard where it can be ground or digestive blockages can occur.

Make clean potable water available at all times. Once a week, disinfect waterers with a solution of one tablespoon of chlorine bleach to a gallon of water. Animals including birds drink more water in winter if it is 50° F., and birds will consume 25 percent more water when temperatures soar over 80° F. In cold weather use a water heater, or empty at night and refill in the morning. One day without water for any reason will result in less egg production the next few days. Eggs are 75% water.

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### ***Did You Know?***

**“Birds eat about 1/2 cup of feed per day, depending on size.”**

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**There are many types of feeders and waterers available.**

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## Management

Laying hens with their original sharp beaks sometimes become cannibalistic or begin eating eggs, especially if the birds are stressed by boredom, crowding, excessive heat and too-bright light.

If you notice your hens picking at each other, check for factors such as overcrowding or lighting that's too bright. Sometimes darkening the pen, tossing a few handfuls of salad greens, or even a few pine branches, into the pen will distract birds from pecking each other or eating their eggs. Diversions like hanging some cabbages, or putting a bale of hay in their yard with bird seed laced in it will help satisfy their natural instinct to search and peck something. Also, try salting their water for a few days, adding a tablespoon of table salt to each gallon of water.

Fresh wood shavings or sawdust six to eight inches deep make an excellent bedding or litter, and is preferable to hay or straw which is difficult to clean up once soiled. Stir the litter frequently during the winter to keep it as loose and dry as possible and help keep the hens' feet and their eggs clean.

Don't let the nest boxes run out of shavings either - bare nesting box floors result in broken dirty eggs. Very wet litter near the water or feed should be replaced. If managed properly, cleaning out and changing the litter only needs to happen once a year.

Once a month, check a few birds for lice or mites, tiny parasites that live on the hens' skin, particularly around the vent area under the tail. They are transmitted by wild birds and can result in lower egg production or death if not controlled. Most farm supply stores carry pesticides registered for poultry parasites. *If you do use one of these pesticide products, read and follow the label directions explicitly.*

Try to collect the eggs at least twice a day. Most hens lay in the morning. There will be less breakage and fewer dirty eggs if you can gather them at noon. If you need to wash dirty eggs, NEVER soak or leave them in standing water, as eggs are very porous. Use warm (110°-115° Fahrenheit) running water and a scrubbing pad.

Knowing what a healthy bird looks like can help you recognize sooner what unhealthy looks like so you can manage accordingly. Healthy laying hens should eat and drink frequently. They should stand erect with head and tail elevated. Their feathers should be smooth and clean, their combs and wattles bright, clean and red. The scales on feet and legs should be clean and waxy, cool to the touch, with smooth joints. The legs, beaks, combs and wattles of egg-producing hens will be paler. Laying hens shouldn't need any medication. All birds should be active, calm and interested in foraging.

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Once in a while a bird may die for no apparent reason. Consult your veterinarian if other hens look sickly — there may be disease in your flock.

### **Final Note**

Consult local zoning and building ordinances before beginning any household livestock operation. Laws and ordinances in some communities may prohibit or restrict such activities in your neighborhood. Also, consider the impact of your poultry operation on your neighbors.

Develop a plan for manure management that will prevent odor and pollution problems and take care in siting and constructing housing for your chickens.

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