

Raising Broilers

Broilers are hybrid chickens bred for fast growth and finish. Typically raised to about 5 pounds, meat production-specific birds are usually processed right at 8 weeks of age. Birds slaughtered between 9 and 12 weeks of age can dress out from 7- 10 lbs. and are called roasters.

It's possible to enjoy a continuous supply of fresh chicken by starting a new flock of broiler chicks when the previous flock is a month old. This way you can process one-quarter of each flock at seven, eight, nine and 10 weeks of age. The best way to determine how many chickens you should raise is to consider how much chicken meat you consume each week. Remember that one 21 cubic foot freezer holds approximately 850 pounds of meat.

Whether you are processing birds yourself or sending them to a facility, the day of harvest should be scheduled carefully so that birds do not grow too large, which jeopardizes the health of the animal.

Sourcing Meat Birds

There are different breeds available for use as meat production birds. Commonly, Cornish Cross are seen in both pastured and contained environments and are praised for their consistent rate of gain, ease of plucking and processing, and clean finished product. These birds must be watched closely for mobility and quality of health while growing. Freedom Rangers or Red Rangers are production-type birds that do well free ranging and can be grown over a period of 12-15 weeks, giving greater flexibility for harvesting. Chicks can easily be ordered from hatcheries or local breeders of dual-purpose varieties.

Raising Meat Bird Chicks

Chicks should be started indoors in a deep container (at least 30 inches deep) which will supply one square foot of floor space per bird. Plastic Sterlite containers work well, but if the container is square, round the corners in some way to prevent chick piling and death. The chicks will require one square foot of floor space for approximately 1 month, at which time the space should double. The brooder area should be well ventilated for odor and dust control but should not expose chicks to drafts or cold air.

An absorbent and soft litter should be used for bedding. Best options include kiln-dried pine shavings, newspaper, or sand. If newspaper is used as bedding, sprinkle it with a **thin** layer of sterile sand or shavings to enhance traction and prevent leg splaying.

Replace wet, soiled bedding/litter as often as needed to keep chicks clean and dry. Watch for any patches of bedding that suddenly appear wet or soaked as this can indicate a leak in your water container.



Fast Facts

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Cornish Cross meat production birds are seen in both pastured and contained environments. Freedom Rangers or Red Rangers do well free ranging.

Chicks will require one square foot of floor space for approximately 1 month, at which time the space should double.

Chicks cannot self-regulate their body temperature until they are 14 days old. This means that in their first two weeks of life they are extremely sensitive to variations in temperature and that they are easily overheated or chilled. Maintain a temperature at chick level of approximately 90 to 95 degrees F for the first week and then decrease the temperature 5 degrees for each week of life. Don't guess! Use a thermometer placed at chick level for correct temperature reading.

An infrared bulb securely suspended from above that can be lowered or raised as needed to regulate the ambient air temperature should be used. Incandescent lights can also be used. **REMEMBER, these heat sources combined with the dry bedding can cause fire, so take proper precautions to keep your family and animals safe.**

Birds should be developed enough at 5 weeks of age to remove the heat fixture, bearing in mind that the ambient temperature of the room should stay around 65-70 degrees until the birds are feathered enough to go outdoors.

The most important nutrient to provide new chicks with is water. Just before hatching, chicks absorb the rest of the egg yolk contained in their egg. This nutrient-rich food will sustain them for approximately 3 days. Therefore, making sure water is in place in the brooder for when the chicks arrive is more important than having food available.

As each bird goes into the brooder, dip the beak into the water so they can get a small drink and hopefully learn where the water source is. Placing colored glass marbles in the trough can encourage chicks to peck at the water and learn to drink from it. Monitor the birds carefully at first, and when you believe all have learned to drink, you can put the food in the brooder (no later than the end of the 2nd day).

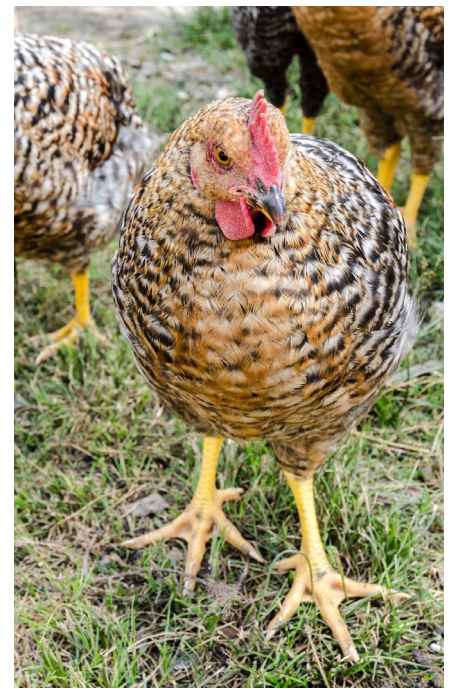
These steps can prevent chicks from developing vent pasting by encouraging early digestive system hydration in preparation for dry chick food. Without water in their system, they cannot correctly digest their food, causing their manure to paste and stick to feathers on and around their vent area. Pasting is very dangerous for young chicks. Incorrect brooder temperatures are also another factor that can lead to pasting.

Nutrition and Feeding Broilers

There are several considerations for nutritional needs of growing broilers. To prevent coccidiosis, you might use medicated chick starter when you get the chicks home. One hundred pounds of starter meal or crumble is enough to bolster the immune system for 25 broiler chicks. After 2 weeks the birds can go on grower crumble or pellets, which are generally 15-20% protein. A finishing ration can be fed for the last week to 10 days before harvest.

Open containers like cardboard egg cartons can be used to supply food for the first three or four days, but these open containers should be switched to limited access containers to prevent chicks from standing in feed and defecating in it. Proper chick feeders are readily available at feed stores and can be found in metal or plastic designs with different capacities to meet the correct volume of feed per number of birds.

Regulating food availability can be used as a tool to slow growth in birds that may be developing too quickly. Keeping rate of gain consistent will enhance overall health and will allow birds to develop stronger legs given their body size. You might choose to feed every 12 hours or spread out the ration on a schedule to regulate feed intake.



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Fresh, clean water should always be available and never restricted. Even pastured birds should be supplied with free choice rations and water. Pasture should only be used to supplement a balanced ration or pelleted feed. 24 hours before slaughter, any grain ration should be removed but water must remain available.

A Final Note

Consult your local zoning and building ordinances before beginning any household livestock operation. Laws and ordinances in some communities (even rural communities) may prohibit or restrict such activities in your neighborhood, regardless of land mass. You should also consider the impact of your home livestock operation on your neighbors. Use care in location and construction of housing for your animals and develop a plan for manure management that will prevent odor, environmental problems, and adhere to NH Department of Agriculture, Markets, and Food, Best Management Practices.

About the Authors

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