
Keeping backyard chickens – what you should know

Summary

- Keeping chickens as pets can be a rewarding experience.
 - Chickens can carry germs such as *Salmonella* even when they appear healthy and clean.
 - Learn how to look after your chickens and how to prevent yourself and your family from becoming sick with germs that cause gastro.
 - Make sure you have good hygiene practices in place, discard cracked or heavily soiled eggs, and cook all eggs thoroughly.
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Keeping chickens as pets can be a rewarding experience, especially for children. However, chickens and other poultry can carry germs such as *Salmonella*, even when they appear healthy and clean. These germs are found in the chickens' faeces (poo) which can contaminate the chickens' feathers, the environment they live in, and the surfaces of their eggs.

Keeping chickens and staying healthy

Follow these simple steps to help make sure that keeping chickens is a positive experience and reduce the chances of you or your family becoming sick:

- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water as soon as possible after touching chickens, collecting eggs, handling nesting material, coming into contact with chicken litter or manure or the environment in which the chickens live.
 - Help young children with handwashing to be sure they are thorough.
 - Supervise young children closely when they are around chickens to make sure they do not cuddle or kiss the chickens, let them touch their face, or put unwashed hands in their mouths.
 - Don't eat or drink around live poultry and make sure hands are washed thoroughly before eating.
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- Have a dedicated pair of shoes or boots to wear inside the chicken enclosure and don't wear these shoes or boots inside your house. Clean and disinfect these shoes or boots regularly.
- Wear gloves when you are cleaning out the chicken enclosure and when you are handling any nesting material which might be contaminated with chicken manure.

Egg safety

To avoid **gastroenteritis** from eggs at home, follow these safety tips:

- Discard cracked, damaged or heavily soiled eggs. Lightly soiled eggs should be cleaned with a dry cloth or a tissue. Never wash your eggs with water as it makes them porous and can enable bacteria on the surface to penetrate and contaminate the egg.
- Always store eggs in the fridge in clean packaging material.
- Label the packaging with the date of lay so that you know how fresh your eggs are. If stored under refrigeration, eggs will keep for 6 weeks.
- When storing, handling and preparing eggs, take the same precautions as you would with chicken, meat, seafood or dairy products:
 - Thoroughly clean your hands, food areas, work surfaces, dishes, utensils and cleaning cloths after working with eggs, especially after egg spills.
 - Serve hot dishes containing eggs straight away, or cool them quickly in the fridge, and keep them refrigerated until they are eaten.
- Thoroughly cook eggs and foods containing eggs until they are hot all the way through.
- Uncooked foods that contain raw eggs (such as homemade mayonnaise or uncooked cake batter) are higher risk, so consider alternative recipes that do not contain raw or undercooked eggs, especially when serving to infants, the elderly and those with weakened immune systems.

Learn more about food safety and eggs.

Can I keep chickens in my backyard?

In Victoria, most councils have local bylaws limiting the number of poultry that can be kept on a property. Some councils also have restrictions or regulations relating to the construction of chicken housing. You may require a permit.

Roosters are usually not permitted due to their crowing. Contact your local council for the most accurate and up-to-date local bylaws and regulations.

In Victoria, by law, owners of more than 50 poultry are required to obtain a Property Identification Code (PIC) for their property. For further information please consult the **Property (PIC) information for poultry owners page** on the Agriculture Victoria website.

Purchasing chickens

When purchasing chickens, it is best to purchase vaccinated birds from a reliable commercial source. A good starter flock usually consists of 4 to 5 birds aged 16 to 24 weeks. This many birds will usually produce enough eggs for a household.

Chicken housing

Ensure your chicken house and chicken run are fox-proof. Fully enclose the chicken run with wire mesh buried into the soil at a depth of 50cm to prevent foxes from digging under the fence.

Cover the floor of the chicken house and the nesting box with sawdust or straw to a depth of 8cm so that it mixes with the poultry droppings to form a litter. This litter can be removed and composted.

Ensure the chicken house is adequately ventilated and positioned to protect against prevailing winds and rain. Additional vegetation along the fencing can assist with wind protection.

Feeding your chickens

It is important to feed your chickens with appropriate food and clean water, refreshed regularly. Commercial layer pellets provide a balance source of the correct nutrients. Kitchen scraps can also be given to chickens to

supplement their diet.

Avoid giving them chocolate, onions and garlic as these can sometimes cause health problems. Use a chicken feeder that is vermin-and-wild-bird-proof to prevent them from eating the chicken feed and contaminating it. Store excess feed in a sealed, vermin-and-waterproof container. Don't feed your birds mouldy feed.

Chicken health

Like all animals, chickens can experience health problems. Check your chickens regularly to ensure they are alert, active, eating well, have clean eyes and nostrils and have noiseless breathing. If you are concerned, consult a vet to assist you with diagnosing and treating any health issues.

Visit the [Agriculture Victoria](#) website to find more information about diseases of backyard chickens.

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