

# Feeding Backyard Chickens

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**Raising** a small backyard flock of chickens for eggs and meat production can be a very rewarding experience. However, establishing and maintaining a good nutrition program for a new flock can be a challenge. Whether you choose to mix diet for your flock or buy feed from a store, the main goal is to make sure you are feeding the correct diet. Nutritional requirements for your birds can be affected by different factors such as age, sex and genetics. To ensure your birds stay healthy and maintain proper production, your feeding program should account for all classes of nutrients, namely; water, proteins, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins and minerals. Feeding your chickens commercially manufactured feed from a feed store is highly recommended because it is nutritionally balanced. Otherwise, if you decide to make diets for your birds, it is important to consult with a poultry nutritionist to make sure your homemade diets are well balanced.

While most diets are commonly made from the same ingredients, the ratio of these ingredients can vary depending on the nutritional needs of the birds. Guidelines for protein requirements for various types of birds are provided in tables 1,2 & 3. It is also important to read the feed label to make sure you are buying the correct feed and also to determine if the feed is medicated or non-medicated. Poultry diets may contain coccidiostats (such as monensin, salinomycin) to help control the bird parasite referred to as coccidia.

## **Feed storage**

Feed bags obtained from the feed stores or homemade chicken feed should be stored in clean and dry conditions. Wet storage conditions can promote mold and fungi to develop on feed, which when consumed by chickens, can lead to stunted growth or death. It is also important to store feed in sealed containers to prevent contamination from rodents and wild birds.

## **Water**

Water is one of the most important, but often forgotten, nutrients. Chickens will drink 2-3 times as much water per weight of feed consumed. It is very important to make sure the type of drinkers used are easily accessible to birds and are set at the correct height. Periodically washing and disinfecting drinking equipment (waterers) for chickens is important to minimize algae and bacteria buildup. If using drinker lines, it is important to flush the lines occasionally with recommended cleaning agents to reduce the chance of contaminant buildup, which can clog the nipples and restrict water flow in the pipes. During summer months, it is important to ensure that your birds are getting cool, fresh water. Waterers should not be placed in direct sunlight or in an area where heat buildup can occur. Similarly, in cold winter months, artificial water heaters should be used to ensure that the water for your birds does not freeze.



**Feed costs account for the largest expense in raising your chickens. To reduce feed costs, consider:**

- a. What kinds of birds are you feeding?
- b. What age are your birds?
- c. Why are you raising them? (meat/eggs)
- d. Is the feed the right feed?
- e. Is there feed wastage?

**Table 1: Nutritional requirement for backyard layers (leghorn, brown egg layers)**

Age	Ration type	Protein content (%)
0-6 weeks	Starter	20-21
7-18 weeks	Grower (pullets)	16-19
19 weeks and beyond	layer	15-18

**Table 2: Nutritional requirement for dual purpose breeds (Plymouth Rock, Rhode Island Red, Delaware etc.)**

Age	Ration type	Protein content (%)
0-3 weeks	Starter	20-21
4-6 weeks	grower	15-19
19 weeks and beyond	layer	16-18

**Table 3: Nutritional requirement for meat type strains (commercial broilers)**

Age	Ration type	Protein content (%)
0-3 weeks	Starter	22-24
4-6 weeks	grower	20-21
7 weeks to market	Withdrawal	18-20

**For more information regarding this topic, please visit:**

[How to feed your laying and breed flock.](#) James Hermes, Oregon State University

[Principles of feeding small flocks of chickens at home.](#) David Frame, Utah State University

[Dealing with summer heat in free range poultry.](#) F. Dustan and J. Moyle, University of Arkansas.

[Feeds and feeding - Small Flock Poultry Expo.](#) Jon Moyle

**References**

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Maryland Cooperative Extension. *Small Flock Owner's Manual* 2008.



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