



FAQ'S - CHICKENS

- **How much do chickens cost to buy?**

Hybrid laying chickens at POL (point of Lay) of 17 weeks of age should cost you around £20 - £25 each. These chickens usually lay between 250 and 330 eggs in their first laying year.

- **Are Chickens easy to keep?**

Yes is the simple answer. Chickens require minimal time from you. Like most pets they require fresh food, water and an enriching environment. Their living space will need to be cleaned out on a weekly basis. They should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected out every month.

- **How much space do you need to keep Chickens?**

You should give your chickens as much space as you can. If you are in doubt about the space you can provide then go for a fewer amount of chickens. Chickens can live quite happily in an enclosed run or ark system for the majority of the week and when you and the family are around you can let them roam your garden or part of it. When chickens are enclosed in an area make the environment as stimulating as possible to help prevent boredom and vices.

- **What do chickens need to eat?**

Chickens require a balanced diet with all the right vitamins and minerals to lay eggs and form good hard shells. Layer's pellets or mash are a compound feed with the correct balanced nutrition to feed a laying bird. They also require access to two different types of grit, oyster shell and flint grit. As hens have no teeth they use flint grit that they ingest and hold in their crop to grind up their food. Oyster shell is a soluble grit to add the extra calcium to their diet; hens need this if they are going to be able to form the shells for the eggs they lay.

- **How much does it cost to feed them?**

A bag of good quality natural layers pellets should cost you around £10 - £14 this is for a 20kg bag this size bag should feed a couple of hens for a 2 - 3 months. You can supplement their diet with other foodstuffs such as mixed corn and dried meal worms as a treat this will reduce the amount of compound food consumed by the birds and also give them extra foraging activity. Layers pellets as well as mixed poultry corn can be found as organic rations they will as you would expect cost a little bit more probably around £14 - £18 for a 20kg bag. Chicken also like nothing better than scratching in the garden eating vegetation and searching for invertebrates.

- **How many eggs can I expect from my hens?**

Chickens lay varying numbers of eggs depending on breed and age. Rhode Island Red hybrid hens usually lay 300 + eggs in their first year of life. Other hybrid hens lay between 240 and 300 eggs in their first year. Hens will lay less in their second and third years as the first year is always the most productive, although the eggs will be larger than in the first year.

Pure breed hens will lay fewer eggs than hybrid hens that have been specifically bred for laying.



- **What is a hybrid hen?**

Hybrid chickens have been developed as a result of selective breeding by crossing pure breed stock with particular desirable characteristics. Originally they were a straight cross of two different pure breed chickens, but now most hybrids are combinations of several breeds and have almost become breeds in their own right. This makes of birds that excel as layers, are very hardy or produce high quality meat or eggs.

- **How long is the lifespan of a laying hybrid hen?**

Hybrid laying birds don't live as long as their pure breed parents but you can expect a hen to live about 4-5 years although they can live longer.

- **What does the term POL or point of lay mean?**

A hen at point of lay is between 17 to 20 weeks of age. It also refers to a bird that has yet to lay an egg so it is described as being on the point of lay. Pullets are also a term given for hens in their first year but may have already started laying eggs.

- **Can chickens fly?**

Chickens can't fly, for example like a pigeon, but they can get to a reasonable height and distance of about 4-5ft in height and a distance of about 5ft. This means that a fence to keep your chickens in would have to be around 6ft high to keep them in. To also prevent them from getting out you can clip one of the wings this is done by using a sharp pair of house hold scissors and trimming the long finger like flight feathers, but care does need to be taken NOT to cut too far up the feather shaft as you can catch the vein and cause bleeding. It is always best to get a knowledgeable and experienced poultry keeper to help you and show you how far to cut.

- **Do chickens get many illnesses?**

If you buy fully vaccinated hybrid hens from a reputable producer/retailer they have already been vaccinated against most of the fatal diseases to affect poultry. If this is the case all that you need to be vigilant about are internal parasites such as worms which are picked up from the birds eating an insects or invertebrates which have already been infected by parasitic worms. Chickens need to be wormed every six to eight weeks with either Verm-X (a holistic non-chemical wormer) or Flubenvet (a chemical based wormer) or such like. Chickens can also become the bearers of external parasites such as mites and lice which are transferred from wild birds. Red mite is the most common and both the chicken coop and birds this, need to be treated on a regular basis. The birds should be dusted with a red mite powder at eight week intervals as a preventative and the house sprayed with a product such as poultry shield on a weekly basis in the summer or in warm wet weather.



- **Can I introduce new chickens to my existing flock?**

This can be tricky to do without previous experience. A good rule is to introduce a number of birds to the flock at once. This can vary if you only have a couple of birds to start with then introducing two new birds should be relatively problem free providing they have enough space to get away from any bullying by the existing birds. If you already have a larger flock of say six to eight established birds then you will need to introduce approximately two thirds of your existing flock size to avoid any one bird being picked on too much. If you have the space you can also, instead of putting the birds together straight away, you can make a temporary run for the new birds in or next to the main coop this way the birds can see and smell each other while getting used to the new members with no risk of physical squabbles. The best time of day to introduce new birds is at night when the resident birds have got to roost for the night. Once they are settled place the new birds in the house with the other chickens on the perch. The older birds will have shut down for the night and will leave the newcomers alone. You will never avoid minor tiffs but this is just a chicken's way of establishing their place in the hierarchy.

- **What bedding is suitable for chickens?**

Inside the house the best bedding to use is wood shavings. This type of bedding is warm dust free and absorbent. This along with once weekly cleaning will keep the hen house clean and dry. Try to avoid using straw and hay in the hen house or nest box as this can harbour parasites such as red mite and can be harmful to the chickens if ingested in large quantities.

- **Can I use my chickens waste as fertiliser?**

You can but you need to be careful not to get it directly onto plants as it is so rich in nitrogen it can burn the plants. It can be prepared to use as fertiliser by composting it for about six weeks or steeping the waste in a bucket of water with the lid on to make a high nitrogen liquid plant feed.

- **Do hens require a cockerel to lay eggs?**

No. A cockerel is only required if you want fertile eggs to breed your own chickens. A hen will carry on ovulating if there is a cockerel present or not.

- **What are the signs of a healthy chicken?**

A young 17-20 week old POL hen will not have developed her comb and wattles yet but these are a good indicator of a chicken's health. They should be bright red and the comb should stand up proud from the head. The bird should have no discharge from the eyes, nostrils or beak. The feathers should be glossy and lay flat to the body. The vent, ('a chicken's all purpose exit hole'), should be clean and no sign of parasites such as mites or lice as this is where they are likely to live on the bird. Overall the bird should look active and interested in its environment and have a good upright posture, scratching and dust bathing are all good signs. For the best chance of acquiring good vaccinated birds go to an established poultry centre where you can have a good look at how the birds behave before you make your choice.

