

Care for Baby Chicks

Have a clean, disinfected facility ready for the arrival of the baby chicks. Chicks must have a brooder area that provides a draft free environment. A cardboard ring or box 12" to 18" high is fine. A circle five feet in diameter is needed for 50 chicks. Calculate that each chick needs a 7.5" x 7.5" area.

Litter: Cover the floor with an inch or two of rice hulls, shavings, ground corncobs or other semi-coarse, absorbent products that do not mat easily. Do not use cedar shavings because cedar is toxic to chickens. The litter should be covered with a non-slick material for three days. Material such as burlap, cheesecloth or paper towels can be used.

Heat: Always provide at least two heat lamps regardless of the number of chicks in case one fails. Use one 250-watt heat lamp with reflector for each 50 chicks (or 2 125-watt). Red heat lamps are preferred because it will reduce aggression and pecking. The temperature must be adjustable, use a thermometer at the chick height to set the height / brightness of the lamps. During the first week the temperature in the brooder should be kept at 95°F. Reduce this temperature 5° per week for five weeks. After that a continued heat source is only required if the temperature is below 65°. A low level light (25-40 watt bulb) can be added when the heat lamps are removed. Keep in mind that the area under the lamps must allow for the chicks to get under and it must not be close enough to set the litter on fire. As the chicks grow the lamps will need to be raised. The chicks will let you know if the heating arrangement is adequate. Chicks will locate where they are most comfortable. If they are cold they will crowd under the heat source. If they are too hot they will move away from the heat and pant. If there is a draft they will crowd away from the draft. When they are comfortable they will be spread out in the available area.

Water: In order to prevent drowning, the water feeder should be specially designed for the size of the chicks. A jar lid filled with marbles works well for very young chicks. ¼ - ½ cup of sugar may be added per gallon of water for the initial watering. After the first day, keep fresh water available at all times. Remember that as the chicks grow their water intake will increase.

Feed: After the chicks start drinking food may be offered. Young chicks need a special starter ration with 20 – 22% protein. After 8 weeks they may be switched to an 18 – 19% chick grower feed. These starting and growing feeds are specially formulated so do not try to “stretch” them with additives. Give your chicks the good start they need.

Floor Space: After the chicks are two weeks old they will need more room. Figure on at least one square foot per bird. Remember that a draft shield is still needed and that all the chicks must be able to get away from, or close to, the heat lamps as they desire. Crowding birds causes problems such as pecking, high mortality rates and increased feed costs.