

DR. MIKE'S TOP 12 HEN CHORES

A dozen daily jobs to keep backyard hens healthy and safe in urban settings

1. Feed a commercially produced ration specifically designed for laying hens, generally not available at pet stores. It is difficult to make a balanced diet at home, and should only be done if you are very experienced and knowledgeable.
2. Do not feed more than a minimum of treats. Mealworms, scratch grains, table scraps and other treats are nutritionally deficient, and if they make up more than 5-10% of the hen's ration, they can lead to nutritional diseases.
3. Failing to provide sufficient amounts of clean water each day can lead to infection and illness. This can be challenging in the winter.
4. Hens need shade on hot days and a source of warmth on cold days.
5. Learn how to recognize discomfort or disease in your flock. Chickens are naturally stoic and the signs of pain and illness are subtle. The majority of hens that are described by their owners as dying suddenly have had chronic issues that had gone unnoticed. Observe all of your chickens daily and look carefully for changes in activity or behaviour.
6. Keeping your coop and run clean is important for both chicken and human health. Have a plan to deal with the nearly 1kg of manure that each hen produces each week. Composting a significant amount of manure is very difficult because of the high nitrogen levels and acidity.
7. All livestock, including chickens, can be carriers of diseases which can be transmitted to humans who are in close contact with them, especially children. It is important to learn how to handle and care for hens without accidentally exposing yourself to animal diseases which can have serious consequences. It is also important to wash your hands every time after handling your chickens, their eggs, or working in the coop.
8. Hens can live to be 7-10 years old. Older hens need to take a break from egg production periodically. Going out of production is termed molting, occurs naturally, and is necessary for older hens to remain healthy. Have a plan for how you will deal with birds that are transitionally out of production, or are done the egg laying portion of their lives. This includes having a safe plan for disposal of any chickens that die under your care.
9. Be aware that many treatments and medications that are given to hens will end up in your eggs. Understanding and respecting withdrawal times for medications given by yourself or your vet are necessary to ensure that contaminated eggs are not eaten.
10. New birds coming into your flock should be vaccinated if at all possible. Most viral diseases such as Marek's Disease and Infectious Laryotracheitis (ILT) are not treatable and are devastating to flocks, but can be prevented through vaccination.
11. Be sure to lock up the chickens at night to keep them safe from skunks, rats, raccoons and neighbourhood pets who will eat the hens and their feed.
12. Eggs are porous and can absorb invisible harmful bacteria if not handled properly.

Avian influenza has become a serious threat to poultry around the world in the past several years. The disease is devastating to both hobby and commercial flocks. If you have sudden, unexplained mortality in several birds, call the Canadian Food Inspection Agency hotline at 226-217-8022 to get testing for this catastrophic disease so it cannot spread to other flocks.

Small Flocks Have Risks - A Vet's Perspective

Prospective small flock hen keepers need to worry about protecting hen and human health.

More municipalities are allowing for the keeping of backyard hens, and interest in keeping chickens for enjoyment and egg production is growing.

- Proper care of hens is more complicated than keeping other pets because poultry have different biological needs, get several diseases that can be transmitted to people, and because unlike pets, hens produce something that we eat. Chickens are indiscriminate in where they deposit their droppings. Any area chickens have access to should be considered to have fecal contamination.
- Even healthy hens will lay eggs with bacteria on the outside of the shell. Proper handling of the eggs is crucial in preventing these bacteria from penetrating into the egg or contaminating anything they contact. Contact your doctor if any disease or infection occurs, and inform medical professionals that you are in regular contact with chickens.
- Animal welfare in small flocks is only good if the caregiver is knowledgeable and conscientious. Providing adequate space, protection, nutrition and environmental conditions are imperative for the well-being of your hens. If you aren't sure of minimum requirements for hens, consult the Canadian Code of Practice produced by National Farm Animal Care Council at: nfacc.ca/codes-of-practice/pullets-and-laying-hens. Also check out Ontario's small flock website at: smallflockontario.ca.
- Protecting your birds from predators is a major consideration for the well-being of your flock. Developing a safe environment that can protect from common predators including raccoons, rats, snakes, skunks, owls, hawks, dogs, cats, weasels and other predators takes forethought, investment and vigilance.
- Veterinary care for your flock is fundamental for both your health and the health of your birds. Establish a relationship with a vet who is knowledgeable about poultry before you have a problem. Vets are a great resource for care, nutrition and prevention as well as disease control.
- Chickens are indiscriminate peckers. The most effective way to prevent your flock from getting a disease is to keep it out of the chicken yard.
- Biosecurity is a concept that must be understood and implemented by all backyard chicken keepers. Quarantining incoming birds and separating your hens from other birds, other flocks and other people associated with chickens are major components of maintaining a healthy flock.

DID You Know?

manure

A hen excretes approximately 2 lbs of manure per week!

health

A hen may appear healthy, but can be laying eggs to the detriment of their own health if not properly cared for.

feed

Laying hens need feed that is especially high in protein and calcium. The high calcium level that a hen needs in her diet would be toxic to non-producing animals such as a cat or dog.

