HOW CAN YOU GET INVOLVED?

Perhaps you are interested in adopting a few day-old chicks. If you do, you can become a member of the 4-H Mailbox Poultry Club. As a member, you’ll receive regular mailings with poultry-related information and helpful hints for caring for your birds.

WHY ADOPT A FEW CHICKS?

There are a number of reasons for keeping a chicken or two at your home. One is that it is an excellent opportunity to learn about animals. Chickens were one of the first animals used by scientists to study animal behavior.

Another obvious reason to have chickens is for eggs. If you get female chicks, they will lay eggs when they are older. If they are Leghorn chickens, they will lay almost an egg a day, providing your family with a nutritious food product.

If you get males chick they won’t, of course, provide you with any eggs. You can, however, show them at fairs, sell them at a livestock auction, or have roast chicken for dinner one night.

If you get a mix of males and females you can produce fertile eggs and hatch out your own chicks. Some breeds of chickens, however, do not go broody very often (That is, sit on the eggs to hatch them out) so you may need an incubator.

Chickens can also make good pets. They can not, however, be housed-trained like a cat, dog or rabbit and will make quite a mess if allowed to roam around the house.

It must be remembered, home flocks, even small ones, require daily care including weekends, vacations and holidays. The time and effort required for this care should be considered when deciding whether or not to adopt a chick.

WHAT WILL YOU NEED?

Food. You will have to provide good quality feed for your chicks. Feed accounts for about 70% of the cost of raising chickens. About 20 pounds of feed (starter and grower) are required to grow a pullet (young female chicken) from 1 day to 5 months old, or about the time the pullet should start laying eggs. Laying hens will each eat about 0.25 pound of feed per day.

A starter feed (about 18% crude protein) should be fed for the first 6 weeks. You can purchase feeders from the store or make your own. For the first week you should use a shallow pan or an egg carton without a lid to make it easier for the chicks to find their food. After about a week, you can use an egg carton with the lid on to reduce the amount of feed spillage. You will need to cut holes in the top to allow the chicks access to the feed. The holes should be at least 1½" in diameter. If the carton comes with holes in it already, you may have to make them larger, as in the example below.

When the birds are older you will need a bigger feeder, such as the one shown below.
Water. A plentiful supply of cool, clean drinking water is one of the most important requirements in raising chicks. You will need to make sure your chicks will have adequate clean water all day long.

You can purchase a waterer from the feed store or you can make your own from a 48 oz fruit-juice can and aluminum pie plate. Make 2 holes on opposite sides of the can about ¾ inches from the open end. Fill the can with water, place the plate on top and turn the can over. For the first few days, you can also use a saucer with an inverted cup placed over it.

Housing. Baby chicks need heat during the first few weeks of life. This is known as the “brooding period”. The area where they are kept during this time is referred to as the “brooder”. The term “brooding” simply means supplying all the things necessary to care for young chicks.

You will need to supply your chicks with a safe, warm, dry area to live. An area in your house, garage or other building can used. The brooding area should be well ventilated, dry, and have access to electricity. You should provide at least 1 ft² of floor space per chick. The area should be large enough to allow the chicks to move away from the heat source as needed to be comfortable.

A cardboard box can be a satisfactory home for up to 12 chicks for a few weeks. The size and shape of the box is not too important as long as it provides enough space for the chicks and the equipment needed to feed and water them. A 2 x 2½ foot box 12-15 inches high is adequate. A screen or wire mesh should cover the box to restrict handling and to protect the chicks from cats and other predators. The chicks will quickly out grow this area. By the time they are six weeks old you will need a larger area to keep them in. They need to be safe from predators and able to get out of the rain or sun.

A more permanent brooder can be made out of a plastic clothes storage box (see below), which can be purchased at any discount store. The plastic construction will be more durable than a cardboard box and it will be easier to keep clean. If possible, the box should be made of clear plastic so that light can pass through. The cover of the box should have two large windows cut out to allow for air exchange without weakening the cover. The windows are covered with ¼” hardware cloth. Washers should be used on both sides of the plastic cover to keep the bolts or nuts from cutting through the plastic.

About 2 inches of litter material gives the chicks better footing and helps keep the box clean. Wood shavings, sawdust, peanut hulls, chopped straw, shredded paper, or sand can be used for litter material. It is also possible to cover the floor with paper towels. The surface must be absorbent. Do not use whole newspapers or other relatively smooth materials. The smooth surface may result in spraddled legs or other leg problems.

Another material that can be used for lining the brooder is indoor-outdoor carpet. It is easy for the chicks to stand up on and it can also be washed. While one piece is drying, another can be in the brooder.

Heat. The chicks must be supplied with a source of heat to keep them warm during the first 6 weeks. A 25- to 40-watt bulb inside a can is satisfactory in a cardboard box brooder. In most rooms, a light bulb placed over one end of the box will provide enough heat. A gooseneck study lamp with a 60- or 75-watt bulb works well. The neck of the lamp can be adjusted to provide more or less heat. If necessary, cut a slit in the side of the cardboard box so the base of the lamp can remain outside the box, with the gooseneck of the lamp fitting in the slit and the lampshade placed inside the box. If you are using the converted clothes storage box, the lamp should be placed on the hardware cloth. Never place the lamp on the plastic.

It is important that chicks have enough room to move toward or away from the heat source and thereby find their own comfort zone.

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