

THE BACKYARD FARMING CONNECTION



THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO

RAISING BABY CHICKS

MODERN
HOMESTEADING
ACADEMY

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INTRODUCTION

IN THIS EBOOK, WE WILL COVER EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT RAISING BABY CHICKS—FROM ADORABLE FLUFFY AND DELICATE BABIES THROUGH THE TEENAGE WEEKS TO FULL LAYING HENS, WE’VE GOT YOU COVERED.

We’ve been raising chickens for well over a decade and have been through the chick rearing process many times and will share everything we’ve learned from experience and extensive research including the supplies you need to raise chicks, how to bring your chicks home on the first day, health concerns to watch for, and how to transition your chicks out to a larger coop and integrate them with your existing hens.

This article mostly applies to people raising 5-15 baby chicks for laying hens as opposed to a larger scale operation of raising a larger number of meat chickens.

This ebook is part of the Backyard Farming Connection **Modern Homesteading Academy**. You can find more information about raising chicks on our website: [The Backyard Farming Connection](#).

SUPPLIES

THE WORLD OF BACKYARD CHICKEN KEEPING IS FULL OF STRONG OPINIONS. IN THIS EBOOK WE SHARE WHAT WE DO AND WHAT WE'VE LEARNED OVER THE YEARS. WE RECOMMEND THAT YOU DO YOUR OWN RESEARCH AND ADJUST THE INFORMATION YOU RECEIVE FOR YOUR OWN SPECIFIC SITUATION. THE GUIDE BELOW IS MEANT TO BE THOROUGH BUT CONCISE,

Before you bring chicks home you will need some special equipment. Remember that you will be supplying all the basic needs for the chicks that a mother hen typically supplies. Many of these things you may already have on hand while a few items (like chick feed) you will need to purchase. Most of these supplies can be ordered online or bought at your local feed shop.

It's important to have the supplies ready and set up at your home prior to bringing home the chicks. This gives you time to check the heat and make sure you have everything so you are ready to transfer the chicks as soon as you bring them home.

You can see all our recommendations for chick supplies below as well as links to purchase these supplies online in our article: [A Complete Guide to Baby Chick Supplies](#)

Supply List for Raising Baby Chicks

- Brooder
- Feeder
- Waterer
- Chick Feed
- Pine Shavings
- Paper Towels
- Heat Source
- Electrolytes
- BABY CHICKS



SUPPLIES

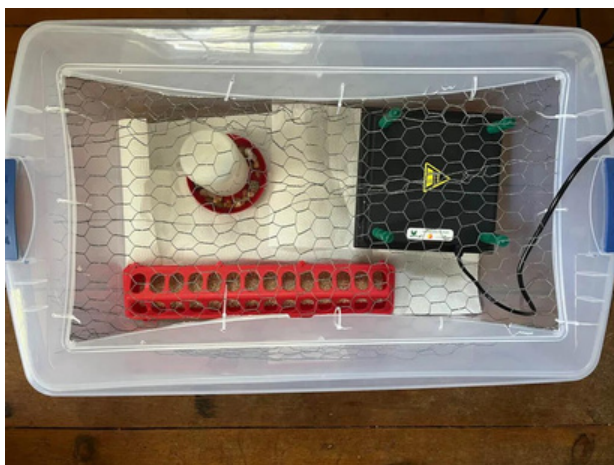
Brooder

Chicks need a special place to stay for the first 8 weeks of their life and often longer. You can not simply put baby chicks in with larger hens or the large hens will peck them to death. A brooder refers to housing used to keep baby chicks inside and safe (it also sometimes refers to the heat source itself).

Depending on the time of year we're raising baby chicks, we typically keep our chicks in the house for the first 4 week then move them to another space – like a barn, garage or basement until they are ready to go into the coop. If nighttime temperatures are still below 60 degrees, we often keep them in the house longer.

You can buy a chick brooder or make one yourself. Over the years we've made several brooders using [dog crates](#), wooden made frames, and most recently a large plastic bin. Keep in mind that chicks need protection from the cold and animals and they will also make a mess so a sturdy brooder that has sides and a bottom to contain the mess work best.

See [How to build a chicken brooder](#).



SUPPLIES

Chick Feeder and Chick Waterer

When raising baby chicks, select a chick feeder that is easy to clean and provides multiple places for each chick to eat. Choose a chick waterer that is small and can be cleaned easily. A waterer with raised feet will stay cleaner or you can raise the waterer on a small platform in your brooder.

Chick Feed

Chicks need specialized feed. Do not feed you baby chicks adult chicken or layer feed. This feed has more calcium and can cause issues with your chicks kidneys. Chick starter feed is specially designed with 15-20% protein. You should feed chick starter/grower until about week 16-18.

For the first few weeks we don't recommend feeding treats or additional food.

Chick Bedding

For the first few days we prefer to use just paper towels in the brooder. We do this for several reasons: paper towels are easy to walk on with traction for the chicks legs, paper towels are easy to clean up, chicks don't confuse the chick feed and the pine shavings, paper towels make it easy to see everything in the brooder and help to keep it clean.

After a few days we begin adding pine shavings. Pine shaving help to absorb moisture and keep the brooder clean and smelling good. Slowly add additional pine shavings until you are just using about 1/2 inch of shavings on the base. Clean the shavings every few days.

Do not use cedar shavings as it can irritate the chicks respiration system.

SUPPLIES

Heat Source

Chicks need a heat source to keep them warm. For the first few days they need to be kept at 95 degrees. Over the first 4-8 weeks, you can decrease the heat by 5 degrees a week until they have enough feathers to maintain their own temperature. This means you need a heat source. We started years ago using a traditional red heat lamp. While this does the job of keeping the chicks warm, these are also a fire risk and we've moved on to safer heating sources.

We recommend heating your chicks in their brooder with a [heat plate like this one](#).

Baby Chicks Temperature Requirements

Week 1 - 95 degrees
Week 2 - 90 degrees
Week 3 - 85 degrees
Week 4 - 80 degrees
Week 5 - 75 degrees
Week 6 - 70 degrees



Continue to supply heat if the ambient temperature is below 50 degree

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SUPPLIES

Thermometer

A small and inexpensive thermometer is helpful to monitor the temperature of the chick brooder when raising baby chicks. You don't need anything fancy and you can just use a wall thermometer on the bottom of the brooder to test the temperature.

Electrolytes and Other Health Equipment

While having electrolytes on hand is not essential, this is an inexpensive and helpful tool to keep chicks healthy – especially if your chicks are arriving by mail. Electrolytes can help give energy to a weak chick.

Other tools you may want to consider include:

- eye dropper
- diatomaceous earth
- tweezers
- petroleum jelly



CHOOSING CHICKS

Once you have your supplies, the next step is to decide where you want to get baby chicks. In general you have a few options including a local farm, a local feed shop, or in the mail. We've done all 3 options and each have their benefits. In general you will want to consider a few things before you purchase your chicks.

Do you want a specific chicken breed?

Choosing a chicken breed is one of the best parts of raising baby chicks! There are so many types of chickens to choose from and you can go with all of one breed or get an assortment of chickens. If you want specific chick breeds, your best bet is to order chicks online from a hatchery. We've order many times with success from [My Pet Chicken](#) and you can find great resrouces here to help you choose the best chicks for you.

There are many criteria to use when selecting the best chicken breeds including:

- Temperature where you live: extreme heat and cold
- Looks
- Temperment
- How many eggs they produce
- General health
- Size
- How well they fly
- Egg color

CHOOSING CHICKS

Do you want sexed chicks?

The next consideration when raising baby chicks is whether you want sexed chicks. Experts are able to determine the chicks gender right at birth and this allows you to order only female chicks if you prefer. This is not perfect and there is always a chance you will get a rooster. We've only gotten a rooster one time. If you want sexed chicks you can usually find them online or in your local feed store.

How many chicks should you get?

The next consideration is the number of chicks. Some states have minimum chicks you can purchase and most hatcheries online have minimum orders. This allows the chicks to stay warm during the first 48 hours from each other's body heat. Chickens typically lay the most eggs from 6 months – 18 months of life. To ensure a steady stream of eggs, consider getting some chickens this year and raising more chicks in another 2 years.

If this is your first time raising baby chicks, we recommend starting with between 4-10 chicks. Obviously if you plan to sell eggs, you may want to consider more chicks from the beginning.

Where to Get Your Chicks

From Your Local Feed Store: The benefit from buying local is the chicks tend to be healthier, less expensive, and you can see them before you purchase them. The negative is that you may be limited to specific breeds.

From a local farm: buying locally from others is a great option although you will have less certainty of the sex of the chicken and even the breed.

Buying Online: Buying chicks online gives you the greatest option for chicken breeds. Since baby chicks don't need to eat or drink for 48 hours overnight shipping works well – there is always a chance that mail will be delayed or the chicks will be left in the cold. In general chicks ordered in the mail arrive weaker. We only order in the mail now for very specific reasons and we don't order chicks over the winter months.

CHICK NEEDS

BELOW ARE THE THINGS YOUR BABY CHICK NEED TO SURVIVE. IF YOU HAVE ALL THE SUPPLIES LISTED ABOVE, YOU WILL HAVE EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KEEP YOUR CHICKS HAPPY AND HEALTHY.

Heat

Chicks need to be kept very warm from the beginning. This is especially important when you first bring them home and in the first few weeks. The general guidelines (seen below) are a good starting point, but the exact temperature will change depending on other environmental factors. If it is very warm out or in your home, you may not need to supply much supplemental heat after the first few days. The best way to monitor the temperature is to watch your chicks. If they are huddled together increase the heat, if they are panting, decrease the heat.

In general you want chicks moving around the brooder and occasionally warming up under the heat source. It's also important that there is a section of the brooder that is cooler where the chicks can go if they get too hot.

Food

As describe in the supplies section above. Baby chicks need specialized food with a high protein to help them grow. Do not feed young chicks food scraps or treats as their digestive system is not ready for this yet. Many people start feeding treats or additional food after 3 or more weeks. The one exception is a weak chick can sometime benefit from eating scrambled egg (especially the yolk) mixed with a little water. We've had success a few times offering this to a weak chick.

Many people also feed their chicks grit and while there is no down side to this, chickens don't need grit if they are just eating chick feed. They do need grit once they start expanding their diet. We usually offer grit after about 4 weeks when we starting giving them some time outside.

CHICK NEEDS

Water

Chicks need constant access to clean water. Chicks are notorious for making a water mess and kicking shavings into the waterer. Raising the waterer and checking several times during the day can ensure that they have the water they need.

When chicks are just a few days old, it is possible for them to drown in the waterer, especially if they are weak and tired for the first few days. Add stones to the waterer to help keep them from drowning.

Space

Baby chicks need at least 6 square inches in the brooder, but after just a few weeks they will need even more space. We use our small brooder for the first 4 weeks and then transition them into a larger area in the barn at 4 weeks.



CARING FOR BABY CHICKS

ONCE YOU'VE COLLECTED YOUR SUPPLIES AND HAVE A BASIC UNDERSTANDING OF BABY CHICK NEEDS, YOU CAN FEEL CONFIDENT TO BRING YOUR CHICKS HOME. IN THIS SECTION, WE WILL GIVE YOU A STEP BY STEP (OR WEEK BY WEEK) GUIDE TO THE FIRST 12 WEEKS WITH BABY CHICKS.

Bringing Home Baby Chicks

In general you will be bring baby chicks home by picking them up at a nearby farm or feed store or will be getting your chicks in the mail. The first few hours and days raising baby chicks are the most crucial for their health.

Before you leave to pick up your chicks, make sure you have your brooder completely set up and the heat source on. Some heat sources take up to an hour to come up to temperature. Double check that the temperature is around 95 degrees under the heat source and that your chicks have everything they need.

If you are picking your chicks up and it is cold outside, make sure to get the heat up and on in your car and place the box with chicks in a secure location where it won't tip over.

Once you get them home open the box and remove the baby chicks one by one from the box by lifting them gently from underneath. Be careful not to squeeze them. As I put each chick in the brooder I do a very quick inspection, looking at their eyes, their vent and their overall appearance. I rarely do anything at this point except observe them as the priority is making sure they are warm and get water.

Before placing each chick under the heat source, I dip their beak in the water.

CARING FOR BABY CHICKS

After all chicks are in the brooder, I spend several minutes watching them. You should make sure your chicks all drink water shortly after arriving. If chicks are arriving in the mail and are weak, you can offer them electrolytes as an energy burst. Simply drip some of the electrolyte water into their beaks.

Here is a summary of what I'm looking for in the first few hours:

- Active chicks that are moving around
- Each chick has found the water source and drinks water
- Take note of chicks with a lot of waste on their butt, especially if it looks like it is covering their vent (possible pasty butt)
- Chicks are walking without their legs splaying
- Chicks start to eat chick feed – if they aren't interested, try tapping the food with your finger or mixing the food with some water
- The temperature is right – chicks are finding the heat source, are not crowding together for warmth, and aren't laying around panting

If a chick seems lethargic, the first thing is to get them water and get them warm (unless they are panting, then they may be overheated). Give the chick a boost by giving them electrolytes directly. You can use a dropper to drip water into their beak or simply use your finger.

We've had to do this with several chicks over the years. We also had one significant pasty butt situation which you can see described below in the common problems section. In general we find far fewer problems with chicks that are purchased locally as opposed to mail ordered.



CARING FOR BABY CHICKS

For the first week, monitor your chicks closely, trying to check on them every few hours and make adjustments as needed. For the first week try not to handle them too much as they are fairly fragile. If you do handle the chicks be careful and keep them low as a small drop can break their legs.

After the first 3-4 days we start adding pine shavings to the chick brooder, starting with just a few flakes and increasing. They will make a mess of this bedding and you may need to put your water up to keep it from getting filled with pine shavings.

Raising Baby Chicks Weeks 1-6

After the first week, you can lower the temperature to 90 degrees. At this point the chicks should be very active and curious and be hopping around the brooder. Each following week you will see them grow more feathers and you can continue to lower the temperature by about 5 degrees each week. You will see the chicks spend a few minutes under the heat and then leave the warmth to walk around the brooder. If the ambient temperature is warm you may even want to lower the heat by more than 5 degrees. The exact temperature is less important than the chicks behavior.

By 6 weeks as long as the ambient temperature is above 50 degrees at night, your chicks should be fine without a heat source. Continue to watch and monitor their behavior and add more heat if they are huddled together. You may also choose to turn the heat off during the day and turn it on just at night when it gets cooler.

During these weeks, continue providing chick feed and fresh water.

CARING FOR BABY CHICKS

By about 4 weeks, depending on the size of your brooder, your chicks will start to need more space and may start to stink. If you have a protected space, you can consider moving the chicks to a larger or at least more distant location. This could be a basement, garage, or barn. We move ours to a stall in our barn that is protected. They still have additional heat, but have more space to move around. For the first few days, we just move the chicks to this new space during the day. If you are raising chicks where it is cold, you will need to keep them inside longer.

You can also start taking your chicks outside to an enclosed area under your supervision for short periods of time. We like to put up a small amount of chicken fencing and let the chicks poke around for 15 minutes a day to start getting used to the outside and being handled. Make sure you are changing the bedding whenever it is dirty – this often means every few days. You will also need to clean out their food and water as they will poop in everything. You will often need to do this daily when raising baby chicks.



CARING FOR BABY CHICKS

Raising Baby Chicks Week 7-12

By 7 weeks, your chicks will start to look like gawky teenagers and will no longer be the cute little fluff balls they were at the beginning. If you haven't already, you can remove their heat source unless it is still very cold outside. At this point they will start exhibiting behavior more like older hens.

Continue to feed your chicks chick feed and provide fresh water. If you have a board you can add it to the brooder so they can start to roost as night.

Sometime between 7-12 weeks we move our chicks outside to a small chicken tractor. They are not old enough to join the larger hens yet as the big hens will pick on them.

When you are moving your chicks outside to a coop for the first time, keep them locked in the coop for the first few days so they know this is home. Over the next few days you can let them out into a fully protected run for a few hours at a time. Especially when your chicks are this young, they should be fully protected including from flying animals from above. Chicks tend to be much better flyers than older hens and will also escape more easily from a run.

MOVING YOUR CHICKS TO THE COOP

Integrating Chicks with your Chickens

Once your chicks are the same size as your existing hens, you can introduce them to the rest of the flock. I prefer to wait until about 15 weeks, but you can do it a bit earlier if you need to.

If possible, expose the chicks to the hens by letting them spend time in adjoining runs. Where they aren't sharing the same space but can see each other. After a few days near each other, move the chicks into the coop with the flock at night. This way when the hens wake up they are simply there. Let the hens out as normal in the morning and watch for signs of bullying.

We've had very few issues as long as the chickens all have enough space to get away if they need to. If you do see a chick getting bullied, monitor the situation and if needed remove all the chicks again for another week and try again. Try to avoid removing just one or two chicks as this may create more problems in the future.

Even after you move the chicks in with the rest of your flock, they won't start laying until 18-22 weeks old.

COMMON HEALTH PROBLEMS

The best way to deal with health issues when raising baby chicks is to prevent them from happening in the first place. Make sure your chicks are well fed and watered, are kept the right temperature and are protected from predators.

Dehydration: The most common problem we've seen in chicks is dehydration. This generally manifests as a chick laying around or acting listless, and it can also lead to other issues like pasty butt. Ensure that chicks are given water as soon as you bring them home and that they are drinking and have constant access to clean water. If a chick is very listless, you may need to force feed it some water. Using a dropper, drip a drop of water onto their beak forcing it to take in some of the water.

Pasty Butt (pasted vent or pasting-up): Pasty butt is a common problem with chicks, especially chicks that have experienced a tough first few days (like mail order chicks). This occurs when the chick's waste covers the chick's vent (or hole where they poop). This basically backs up the chick and they can die. It is normal for the chicks to have some stuff on their butt – the problem is when this covers everything. The most important thing is not to simply pull off the stuff as this can pull off their fragile skin and kill the chick.

This is what I recommend for treating pasty butt:

- Start by hydrating the chick – give some water drops to the chick directly.
- If the chick is still moving around happily and eating and drinking – consider monitoring it before taking further action.
- If the chick stops eating and/or becomes lethargic with a wad of poop hardened on its butt – you will need to act. Soak the butt of the chick in a warm dish of water or let a wet paper towel sit on its butt. Dab the chick's butt to try to remove the built up poop. Do not pull and tear it off and be as gentle as possible.

COMMON HEALTH PROBLEMS

We've had a few chicks with some built up poop on their butt and it usually resolved on its own with hydration. The one time we needed to really deal with the situation, once we removed the dry poop, the chick quickly released a large amount on poop and went from lethargic and near death to healthy very quickly. Pasty butt may also occur if the chicks are too warm.

Wrong Temperature: If your chicks are too hot they will lay around and pant and if they are too cold they will pile on top of each other. Both issues can cause the chick to die.

Spraddle Leg: This is a deformity of the legs where the legs splay out and the chick can't walk. You will often see the feet pointing out. Chicks with straddle leg will become worse if they are on slipper bedding like newspaper or magazines.

To fix straddle leg you will need to hobble the chicks legs until they can stand on their own. You can do with with rubber bands or other materials from home or buy a specially made [brace for straddle leg](#). I have never used these so am only going off what others have said about them.

Scissor Beak: scissor beak refers to when a chicks beak is crossed, crooked, or overlapping. Extreme scissor beak could keep a chick from feeding and drinking and result in the death of the chick, however, most chicks go on to be healthy and happy adult chickens. There is no solution to this problem but there may be was to adapt for the chicken, such as serving their food at head height.