

# Keeping Your Flock Healthy During the Winter Months



In the Pacific Northwest, long dark nights and rainy days are the hallmarks of winter. The rain and darkness are the main challenges to keeping your chicken flock healthy and happy through the winter season. Here are a few tips to help them thrive even during our darkest time of year.

## Don't Add Heat

Our winters, even in the colder parts of our region, do not get cold enough to need any type of supplemental heat in the chicken coop. Additional heat is likely to be more harmful than helpful. Not only are heat lamps a high fire risk, but the variation of temperature then created with the out-of-doors is enough to upset your bird's natural adjustments to temperature.

Chickens have ample layers of thick feathers that keep them toasty warm even at low temperatures. To conserve heat, they will huddle together at night and eat larger amounts of food. But heat they do not need.

## Ventilate, Ventilate, Ventilate

While chickens do not need heat, they do need lots of ventilation in their living quarters to keep them healthy. Because they spend more time in the coop in winter than during the summer months, there is more manure build-up that can lead to elevated levels of ammonia and high humidity from their body heat. High ammonia levels can injure the birds' complex respiratory system and make them susceptible to pathogens that cause respiratory infections. In addition to having a good manure management plan, having ample ventilation in the coop is vital to keeping your birds healthy. Vents up high, rather than low, are preferred to avoid creating drafts in the birds' roosting area. Blowing drafts can disturb and penetrate the feathers, thus disrupting the efficiency of the chickens insulating down coats.

## Manure Management

A good plan for handling the manure output from your flock is needed all year round, but is especially critical for winter. Since chickens spend many hours on the roost during the dark hours, having an easily cleaned droppings board under the roost is valuable. Filled with sand or PDZ (a mineral product used in horse stalls to control ammonia levels) the dropping boards can be easily scraped or

scooped to remove droppings daily. Add the droppings to your compost pile for a nitrogen boost next spring.

## Control Mud

Outdoor runs can quickly become a soggy, muddy mess during the rainy season. Having a covered run with good overhangs and ample drainage is a way to provide a dry outdoor area for your flock. Well draining sand or a deep bedding of wood chips are two of the better substrates for use in high impact runs. The best of all worlds is a rotational pasture system that gives the birds time on fresh ground, even during the worst weather months.

## Winter Nutrition

Feed intake may increase slightly during cold weather as chickens work to maintain their body heat. However, over-feeding your birds can be hazardous to their health. Hens who add too much fat are at serious risk of liver damage, as well as likely to suffer a lower rate of egg laying. An offering of "scratch" grains (wheat, corn, barley, milo) late in the day, before they retire to the roost, can provide the flock with an extra bump of carbohydrates to keep them well heated at night during cold spells. But these whole grains should not comprise more than 5% by weight of their diet.

For those birds undergoing their annual molt during winter, high protein supplements can help them maintain their body condition while quickly growing healthy new feathers. These are easily supplied with black oil sunflower seeds (BOSS), commercially grown dried grubs, mealworms, or small amounts of dry cat food.

Additional ideas for ways to bump winter nutrition are to grow fodder grains or feed fermented mash.

## Additional Supplements

Good digestion is key to keeping poultry healthy during times of environmental stress, such as cold or wet weather. Making sure your birds' diet includes good sources of pre/probiotics will help them maintain the correct gut biota to digest and absorb their feed, as well as provide competitive exclusion of other, less healthy bacteria that could produce disease. While there are commercial products

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available, there are also natural sources you may have in your own kitchen. Good prebiotics (fiber that feeds good gut bacteria) for chickens include barley, oats, berries, lentils, yams, apple and banana. Sources of probiotics (good gut bacteria) are fermented feed, yogurt and fermented vegetables such as sauerkraut.

The addition of apple cider vinegar to drinking water helps acidify the gut, creating an environment supportive of the good bacteria while discouraging harmful organisms such as those that cause coccidiosis and botulism. One tablespoon per gallon of drinking water is the normal dosage. Other antimicrobials are oregano and garlic. Dried and sprinkled on your chickens' food they may help with respiratory system and immune support during the long months of winter.

## **Water**

No matter the season, chickens need constant access to clean water. During cold weather you may need to take care to ensure that water is not frozen. Offering warm water will encourage the chickens to drink more, vital for maintaining good egg production. Keeping waterers clean of biofilm by giving them a periodic scrubbing will also help reduce the risk of salmonella contamination.

## **External Parasites**

During wet weather, birds may have less opportunity to dust bath outdoors. Providing them with a dry dusting area will go far in helping prevent external parasites such as mites and lice. Dry sand or fine dirt are the best for bathing, while wood ash can be added if good ventilation is provided. We don't recommend the use of diatomaceous earth in dust baths, as the fine particulates can damage the birds' sensitive respiratory systems.

## **Egg Laying**

As days shorten, the natural response from a hen is to slow down or cease laying eggs. Chickens naturally need over 12 hours of daylight in order to enter a period of lay, and a day length of 14-16 hours is required for the most productive output. Specially bred hybrid layers, those developed for the commercial egg industry, will maintain production with less reliance on light levels but will lay for a much shorter span of their life and will generally experience higher rates of reproductive problems. While some breeds lay through winter better than others, and young pullets generally outperform older layers, adding artificial lighting can help encourage a more productive output from your flock. The pros of adding lights is higher egg production, the cons are higher costs for both lights, timers and feed. Many flock keepers choose to let their birds have a natural rest period over winter, with time to replace mineral reserves, molt and grow new feathers and generally rest from the rigors of high egg production during the light months.