

# How Much and When to Feed Chickens

By Kimberly Willis and Rob Ludlow from Raising Chickens For Dummies

Feeding backyard chickens is an imprecise science. It's difficult to tell someone how much to feed their chickens, or even when to feed them. So many variables are involved: the type of chickens, whether they're growing or laying, how active they are, how neat you are, the type of feeders you have, the number of free-loading pests you support, and the weather.

Use these guidelines for feeding your chickens, but alter them for your own flock

Our modern, high-production egg breeds convert feed to eggs very efficiently, especially if they're fed a ration formulated for laying hens. After they're laying well, it takes about 4 pounds of a quality feed of 16 to 18 percent protein to produce a dozen eggs. The breeds kept for dual purposes (eggs and meat) generally have heavier body masses to support and need more feed to produce a dozen eggs than a lighter production breed.

It takes about 2 pounds of feed to produce 1 pound of body weight on a growing meat-type bird. So if a broiler weighs about 6 pounds at 10 weeks, it will have eaten about 12 pounds of feed. Remember that it ate less when it was small, and the amount of feed consumed increased each week. A medium-weight laying hen will eat about 1/4 pound of feed per day when she begins producing. These are rough estimates, but they give you some idea of what to expect.

Chickens eat more in cold weather and less in hot weather.

If you are unsure how much to feed your chickens (and don't want to accidentally deprive them), fill the chickens' feed dishes so food is available much of the day, or use feeders that hold several day's worth of feed. You can use this feeding method for all types of chickens. It's the way chickens would eat in nature; they eat small amounts frequently.

You can continue that method if you like, or you can feed your chickens at certain times of the day. (Most people who use this method choose morning and evening.) This allows you to control the amount of feed that may attract pests. And if the chickens are too heavy, it restricts the amount they can eat. With free-range birds, it encourages them to lay and to sleep in the coop. Usually, however, it's just a matter of preference; some people like to observe and tend to their chickens more often than others. This method works well for all but meat birds.

Because of their heavy rate of growth, the meat-type broiler chickens need to have food available to them at all times, day and night. Remember, chickens don't eat in the dark, so the lights must be on for these birds all night. For the Rock-Cornish crosses, the lights should be on 24 hours a day, and feed should be in the feed pans at least 23 of those hours. Some people recommend an hour of no feed, but most home chicken-keepers find that difficult to regulate. Just make sure they always have feed. Laying hens, pets, and show birds are fine with restricted times of feeding and don't need feed at night.

Be very careful not to feed moldy food, which can kill or harm your chickens, and make sure food is stored so it won't attract rats, coons, and other pests. If you're using a lot more feed than you think you should, pests like rats may be eating it at night. You may want to empty feeders at night or put them inside a pest-proof container for all birds other than the broiler-type meat birds.

If you need to add grit to your chickens' diet, you can supply it in a small dish from about the fifth day of life. Chicks should be eating their regular feed well before you add grit, or they may fill up on it. Make sure the dish is covered or narrow so the birds don't dust-bathe in it. Discard it and add clean grit if it becomes contaminated with chicken droppings.