

What Do Chickens Eat? A Guide to Feeding Chickens



Chickens are becoming one of the most popular animals to take over backyards. Easy to feed and requiring little maintenance, what do backyard chickens eat? Let's deep dive into chicken feed and what food is best for your poultry's well-being.

Nutritional requirements of chickens

Chickens need a balanced diet to support good health. Their diets will tend to shift with the season changes, focusing on protein during summertime and carbohydrates for winter.

What does a chicken need in its diet and why

During the winter months, carbs are a great source of energy for chickens. Feed chickens' food that is primarily made up of carbohydrates, they won't get the proper nutrients to keep a healthy lifestyle. Make sure to keep this high-carb diet during the colder season.

In the summertime, when feed is more readily available, and their bodies don't have to work as hard, you can feed your **chicken layer feed** with higher protein levels (18 percent or greater). Organic feed or grower feed works as well!

Healthy chicken treats can be a great source of protein, but you should feed these treats in moderation because they are high in calories and fat.

How can you tell if your chicken is getting the nutrients it needs

There are a number of physical changes you can look out for to see if your chicken is getting the proper nutrients. Chickens should have smooth, clean feathers and bright eyes at all times. This means that their feed holds enough protein, fat and vitamins A and E (antioxidants). If they don't get these things from feed or treats, supplement their feed with these items.

What else should you be aware of when it comes to chicken nutritional requirements

It's important to feed your chicken in small amounts throughout the day. Chickens don't have much room for storage, so feeding in small amounts helps keep your feed safe. Feeding them too much food or chicken treats at once may cause them to not eat all of it, which can cause their feed to go stale. When feed goes bad, it loses nutritional value.

What chickens should eat each day

There are **many kinds of feed** that chickens can eat, but the basic ingredients include cracked corn, soybean meal, fishmeal, or meat and bone meal.

Chickens should eat a well-balanced diet of feed that is high in protein and low in carbohydrates. Supplement their feed with a healthy treat if you want to give them more nutrients, but these should only make up 20 percent of their feed intake because they are high in calories and fat.

How much feed should you give chickens each day and why

On average, each chicken should eat about a half cup of feed per day. Again, this is to avoid overfeeding your flock, which can end up costing you more money in the long term. When feeding chickens, it might be necessary to separately feed any that are overweight and need to cut back on their scratch grain.

Overweight chickens can have health problems. If you have an overweight chicken, cut their scratch grain part back and watch them closely until their weight returns to normal.

When and how should you go about feeding your chickens

Feed your chickens in the morning and evening. Use a gravity **feeder** that you can hang from a wire or post. These feeders will keep feed off the ground, where pests like rats and mice might get into them.

Additionally, make sure all members of your flock always have access to feed. Putting feed in more than one location around your coop will help this concern.

What should you keep in mind when it comes to dietary variety

Dietary variety is important to chickens because they need a balanced feed having all the necessary vitamins and nutrients. Healthy chicken treats can help keep their diets balanced, but make sure you're feeding them the right types of treats.

Water for chickens

It is necessary to **provide an adequate supply of fresh, clean water** for your birds at all times. Chickens will drink approximately three times as much water by weight as they eat in feed. A good rule of thumb is to provide one quart of water for every four chickens. Water intake levels will also increase significantly during periods of warm weather. Baby chicks should only be offered water, (no feed) during the first hour. The first water offered to chicks should include $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sugar and 1 teaspoon of Terramycin per gallon. This will help boost immunity and reduce the stress of shipping. For the second day, 1 teaspoon of Terramycin only should be added (no sugar,) and then fresh clean water after that.



Occasional treats for chickens

Occasional treats for **backyard chickens** include grapes, raisins and corn. Grapes feed best as a treat when you cut them in half with seeds removed from one side.

Feed raisins sparingly because they contain high levels of sugar that can cause bloating or kidney problems if given too often.

Corn is okay to feed chickens occasionally but should only be given as a treat because it doesn't supply the same level of nutrients that feed does.

What are some good, natural treats you can give your chickens

If you've got food in your kitchen, chances are a good part of that would make an excellent treat for your flock! Healthy chicken treats include:

- Mealworm
- Table scraps (strawberries, lettuce, carrots, pumpkins, etc.)
- Sunflower seeds
- Turnip greens

What are some healthy treats you can make for your chickens

There are a number of **healthy treats** you can feed your chickens, including:

- Mealworm treat (made with whole wheat flour and mealworms)
- Sunflower seed crusts (sunflower seeds that have been crushed into small pieces mixed in water and pressed onto bread or crackers to form a crust; the idea is similar to a fat-free granola bar)
- Oatmeal raisin treats (made with oatmeal and feed)

What are some options for treats you can buy for your chickens

If you're in a hurry and can't make your own feed, there are also some excellent commercial treats you can buy for your chickens.

- Vita-Bugs (a vitamin-enriched cricket treat) is a great choice that you can find in most feed stores.
- Oven-baked chicken feed bites (small pieces of feed dried out to create a crispy crunch) are another excellent feed possibility to feed your chickens.

Foods to avoid feeding your chicken

The wrong type of food can have all sorts of negative effects on your chicken's health and egg production. Sugary foods can cause problems with egg laying and obesity in general. However, egg production is most often affected by feed, not feed-related treats.

Other foods to absolutely avoid include:

- Raw potato peels (can cause bloat)
- Garlic and onions in feed (toxicity; can affect egg production)
- Dog/cat food (too high in protein for chickens)
- Dairy products or milk chocolate bars (although most people feed these to their chickens with no ill effects, there are some cases where consumption is toxic for chickens)

What are the most common mistakes chicken owners make when it comes to feeding their birds

The most common feed-related mistake chicken owners make is not feeding their chickens enough. Chickens need feed that has 16–18 percent protein, and if they're only receiving feed with lower levels of it than this, they won't grow as quickly or lay as many eggs.

There are other mistakes people tend to make when supplying food for their chickens, including:

- Giving them feed that is past the end date.
- Making feed changes too quickly (it can take up to four weeks for a chicken's digestive system to adjust). If you switch feed types suddenly, your hen might stop laying eggs or grow sick.
- Trying new feed mixes without checking with an expert first.

- Not keeping feed and water stations properly. Chickens, just like humans, need clean food and water to stay healthy. If they're not giving their feed or water dishes a good scrubbing at least once every few days, the chickens are more likely to get sick.



Frequently asked questions

Where do I find the most accurate and up to date information on feeding poultry?

Everything you need to select the right kind of feed for your birds is listed on the backs of the bags.

What do I feed my chickens and/or game birds?

Like other animals, birds require carbohydrates, proteins, fats, minerals, vitamins, and water to sustain life. Complete poultry feeds are formulated to meet the differing levels of these basic needs during the stages of life.

How often do I feed my chickens?

The most widely accepted method of feeding poultry to attain maximum production is a full feeding method. Full feeding refers to offering a constant supply of feed at all times. Typically, when hens are restricted from consuming the amount of feed they desire, egg production will cease.

How much do I feed my chickens?

An average laying hen will consume about ¼ pound of feed per day, depending on factors such as size of the bird, weather conditions, and level of productivity. Consult the backs of the bags for guidelines for feeding other bird species.

Will my chickens get all the nutrients they need from scratch?

No. Scratch feeds, (usually cracked, rolled, or whole grains such as corn, barley, oats, or wheat), are relatively low in protein and do not provide balanced nutrition like complete feeds. In fact, if too much scratch is added to an already complete feed ration, nutrient levels can be diluted. Therefore, it is recommended that scratch be fed sparingly. A general rule of thumb is to feed only as much scratch as the chickens can clean up in about 20 minutes. If a **scratch feed** is offered, it is also a good idea to include an insoluble grit such as granite or cherry stone. Oyster shell is not a substitute for grit, because it is too soft. While feeding scratch is not necessary when feeding a complete feed, it does encourage the natural behavior to scratch the ground providing exercise and consumption of the grit necessary for digestion.

Should I feed laying hens differently than broilers and roasters?

Yes. Meat birds require a higher-level protein (approx. 20%-24%) for maximum growth. Laying hens can be maintained on a 16% protein layer feed that has added calcium to provide the hen with the proper nutrients to produce good eggs.

Is it okay to feed my chickens table scraps?

While chickens appear to love table scraps, they are not necessarily beneficial to productivity or egg laying. Feeding a small amount of table scraps as a "treat" is not harmful to the birds, and is acceptable. However, the same rule applies to table scraps as scratch grain, the total supplemental of scratch and table scraps should be no more than can be cleaned up in about 20 minutes.

When is it necessary to feed oyster shell?

When the laying hen's diet is deficient in Calcium, the hen lays eggs with thin shells, or no shell at all. Selecting a complete layer feed such as DuMor 16% Poultry Layer provides adequate nutrients in the proper proportion and allows the hen to produce eggs with good shells. If thin shells become a problem, a supplemental supply of calcium should be provided. Oyster shell is the most widely used form of supplemental calcium. When oyster shell is to be fed, it is recommended that 2 lbs. of shell be added to every 100 pounds of complete layer ration.

Why do chickens need grit?

Birds do not have teeth to break down food for digestion. Food is swallowed whole and goes to the crop to be stored and mixed with saliva. The feed then passes to the stomach where it mixes with digestive juices. From the stomach, the feed then passes into the organ called the gizzard. The gizzard contains small stones, which the bird has eaten to help the gizzard to grind up the food for digestion. Nutrients are then absorbed as the feed passes along the intestine. The chicken must swallow the stones that the gizzard requires to grind up the food. Grit is the term for these tiny stones. Granite and cherry stone are

two recommended grits. Limestone and Oyster shell are good for shell production, but are not acceptable substitutions for grit because they are too soft.