

Raising Chicks

Raising your own chicks, whether to go on to be laying hens or birds for the table, is a really fun experience for both adults and children and it is relatively simple if you have a small shed or garage. Here we try and run through the basics you need to follow, but we are happy to try and offer advice if you need it and the materials you need should come to less than £15.

Setting up chick housing:

Chicks will need somewhere free of strong drafts and predators to grow, so a shed or garage is ideal. You can't really raise them in your home because as they grow they lose very fine hairs replacing these with feathers and these hairs make a mess and it is not good to breathe them in too much. A good chick enclosure to use within your shed/garage can be made quickly and cheaply using hardboard. Usually by screwing 2 pieces of hardboard* which are 4 feet by 2 feet together, so you have a round structure 2 feet high. Place this on the floor of the shed/garage. Place this on an old towel or sheet – do not use anything slippery like lino, magazines, hardboard etc. After the first week you can use wood shavings.

Setting up heating/light:

You can buy a plastic mechanics' lamp unit** which consists of a screw bulb holder with handle, a cable and a fitted plug. Normally these come with an on/off switch on the handle as well. When you buy this, just unscrew and remove the metal guard or plastic shield, because usually the bulb you will use will not fit otherwise.



Now the choice of bulb is either an infrared bulb*** (which are a bit pricy – ok if you intend to raise more chicks) or an ordinary 60 or 80 watt spotlight bulb**** will work well. The bulb needs to be suspended into your round chick enclosure so that the bulb is 6 or 7 inches from the ground.

At least every week you will have to raise the bulb slightly as the chicks get bigger. It is easy to gauge what height you need the bulb as follows;

- If the chicks all huddle up directly under the light all the time, then they are too cold so lower the lamp.
- If the chicks are all around the edge of the enclosure, then they are too hot and are trying to get away from the heat, so raise the lamp.

Ideally the chicks will be evenly spaced around the enclosure during the day, although they will often cuddle together at night time.

Note: Have a spare bulb to hand in case you need to change it, they tend to blow when the shops are shut.

Food and water:

A small dish is ideal for holding their food, so long as the edge is no higher than 1 ½ inches so they can get in and out to feed. Do not try the same approach for water as chicks can easily drown. Use a small drinker OR use a larger drinker but stand this outside of the round enclosure. To do this just cut a small oblong section from the bottom of the hardboard so that a part of the drinker can slide into the enclosure filling the gap but the chicks can't get out. Make sure your lamp and the water are not close together, because you must not have the drinking water getting warm or hot.

Regime for raising chicks:

Day olds to 4 weeks: Place the chicks into the enclosure and just gently dip their little beaks into the water. Make sure that the feed dish is topped up with chick crumb. Keep the chicks like this, with constant access to feed and water with the lamp on 24/7.

Week 5: By this stage you can turn the lamp off during the day and just turn it on overnight. It does depend on the weather and the time of year, but provided it is not below freezing during the day and relatively mild, this starts to acclimatise the chicks.

Note: At about this stage the chicks will soon be able to fly just enough that they can make it over the side of their enclosure. Just build the sides up by another foot or two, you can use poles and an old sheet etc.

Week 6: You should now be able to turn the lamp off completely, but again, if cold weather is predicted pop it back on.

Note: At about this stage change the feed from chick crumb to growers pellets for laying hens or to fattening pellets for table birds. You can mix half crumb with half pellets for a few days to help the change over. You should also feed them using a proper feeder instead of a dish.

Week 7: The chicks should be able to go out during the day, but not if it is really cold or raining. Let them have access to grass which is not too long (cutting the grass first is best!). You can just put the whole enclosure outside but if you have a run or other area to keep them safe that is better. Return them to inside the shed/garage of an evening and night time.

Week 8: By this stage the chicks should be ready to move outdoors permanently.

Table birds will remain on fattening pellets but laying hens should change from growers pellets to layers pellets at 18 weeks. The term Point of Lay (POL) is an 'age range' rather than an exact age. Hens start laying anywhere between 16 and 24 weeks of age.

*Two sheets hardboard approx £4.50

**Bulb holder approx £6.50

Bulb approx £5.50 or *approx £1.00