

Tips on Raising Turkey Poults

Turkeys are lots of fun to keep. They are extremely interactive as poults (turkey name for babies), they will think of you as their 'mother' and want to be with you all of the time. If you wish to raise turkeys for meat, it will take 6 months to grow them to a good size and you will have a much better-quality bird, moist and full of flavour, unlike anything you can buy in a supermarket - (*because it's raised outdoors instead of in a warehouse with 30,000 other turkeys never seeing daylight*). They can be a little more difficult to raise than chicks and require a bit of extra TLC. Turkey poults are fairly easy to raise if you follow a few simple steps: Turkey poults love heat.



They will be happiest if you keep their temperature at 37 C for the first week, then lower the temperature by about 1 degree per week, until they are fully feathered, which is approximately 4-5 weeks of age.

They will still appreciate a heat lamp at night for a few weeks after this period if the nights are cool. You can tell if they are comfortable by the way they arrange themselves under the heat lamp - all clumped under the heat source, they are too cold; all far away from the heat source, they are too hot; spread all over the floor, they are comfortable.

They will also cry (cheeping) if they are cold or ill, and will be fairly quiet if they are happy. Always make sure they have room to get away from the heat. Keep them clean and dry; never raise them on smooth surfaces like newspaper. Concrete is good, as they can eat bedding which makes them ill.

The main problem with baby turkeys is that their eyesight is very bad for the first week or so, so they might not eat and drink if they can't find it resulting in death (poults absorb the yolk when they hatch so even if they do not find the water, they will live for 4 or 5 days, deaths around this time occur if they have not been eating during that time). You can hang spotlights over feeders/drinkers to illuminate them, and also get them eating and drinking properly by placing shiny coloured marbles in the feed and water to get their attention. Never give turkey poults very cold water, as it can kill them. The water should preferably be lukewarm (a well placed spotlight can achieve this), and it is a good idea to add a vitamin supplement to their water if possible.

Turkeys need higher protein than chickens. The poults will need a 'turkey starter crumb' for the first 5 weeks, then you can change them over to 'turkey rearing/growers'. Never feed them layer pellets, as the calcium level is too high for growing birds. When they are about 3 weeks old, you can start sprinkling a little chick grit on their feed, like you would salt your food. Turkeys are very friendly, intelligent and inquisitive birds and you can easily teach them to eat out of your hand, come to your call, and they will often follow you around, begging for treats and attention and watching what you do with interest! The more you handle them, the tamer they will become. Turkeys are an enjoyable bird to have around the garden, but if raising for the table it is best to keep 2 or 3 minimum - so you don't get as attached.

A note about Blackhead (or Histomoniasis):

It is best to keep turkeys and hens on separate ground, and it is also better not to raise turkeys on ground that has been used to keep hens on. The reason for this, is that hens pass through their systems a type of worm/parasite which although is not usually harmful to the hen, a build up of these is often fatal for turkeys. The illness is called 'blackhead' simply because the worms attack the intestines and liver of the turkey, affecting blood circulation and their head goes very dark. A classic symptom is that a turkey's poo will turn a really bright almost luminous yellow colour. Death follows within days of this symptom and there are no medications available from your vet to treat blackhead, although there are recent reports in veterinary journals of blackhead successfully treated with the pleuromutilin antibiotic 'tiamulin' (treatment consists of administering tiamulin via the drinking water for five days at 25 mg per kg of bodyweight).

The main weapon against blackhead is prevention, hence the benefits of keeping turkeys on separate ground. If you are unable to do this, then the following advice should allow you to run both turkeys and hens together on the same ground:

- Worm the turkeys every 6 weeks to prevent build up of the worms in their system.
- Move animals to fresh area and treat previous area with lime to 'cleanse' the ground. Do this using 'hydralime' available from builders merchants, scatter by hand, and allow 3-4 weeks to weather in.

Rearing Turkeys:

By week 5 move the turkeys from turkey crumb to Turkey Rearing/Growers pellets until aged 14 weeks at which time change their feed to Turkey Finisher pellets (or layers pellets if not going to be Christmas Dinner). Your turkeys can roam outside in their enclosure from 5 - 6 weeks but need secure housing of a night time. A light in the house/shed coming on at 4.00pm will encourage most of the turkeys back into their house and a low light - just 15 to 40 watts overnight is very helpful to stop them panicking or becoming scared.

Turkeys for the table:

Once on a turkey fattening ration, feed them as many kitchen scraps as possible and let them enjoy the outdoor life. Aim to dispatch the turkey 10 days before Christmas day. Once dispatched, pluck the turkey at once and wrap the bird inside a pillowcase. Hang the turkey by the feet for 7 to 10 days in a cold area such as a shed or garage. This hanging is essential to the quality of the meat and will not give a 'gamey' flavour but will give you a full flavoured turkey which is better than anything you have ever tasted.