



KEEPING CHICKENS AS PETS

How to provide rescued chickens
with a suitable home

This guide was created in cooperation
with the Hof Narr animal sanctuary



Chickens are among the most misunderstood animals. Worldwide, they are almost exclusively viewed as a source of food, while even their most basic needs are constantly being ignored. This is because chicken farming is almost always purely about profit and not about real lives or the animals' welfare.



However, chickens are amazing animals! They make friends with each other and live in strong social group hierarchies. They know and like each other (or not!). Just like us humans. Their characters, likes and dislikes are as varied as they are among us humans. Each chicken has its own individual personality, just waiting to be developed.

Keeping chickens as pets is an enormous enrichment. Some chickens are very quick to seek our company, others are shy and some may even be real loners. But each of them is worth getting to know and ensuring that they can at least enjoy a well-deserved retirement after a life as intensive workers in the service of the human being.

To ensure a smooth and happy cohabitation between humans and chickens, we have compiled the most important things for you in this guide.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Anyone keeping chickens in Switzerland is required to know about their needs and behaviours. It is the owner's responsibility to ensure that the animals remain healthy and that the applicable animal welfare regulations are complied with. In addition, the owner is obliged to inform the responsible cantonal coordination office (kantonale Koordinationsstelle) in order to have themselves registered as chicken owners, even if it is only done as a hobby. There is no law requiring specialised training for the private keeping of chickens.

LIFE EXPECTANCY

The natural life expectancy of a domesticated chicken is up to ten years. Sadly, hardly any chickens will reach this age because the overbreeding and exploitation of chickens often take their toll early on. Nevertheless, former heavy-working laying hens can still live a few happy and healthy years, provided they receive the necessary care.

CHICKENS IN THE LAW

The Swiss Animal Welfare Ordinance regulates a number of issues relating to keeping chickens. However, it should not be forgotten that the law only contains the most basic requirements; it does not cover welfare-related issues, it merely sets out at which point something is considered cruelty to animals, and the according punishment.

The most important article in the Swiss Animal Welfare Ordinance is article 13 which states that chickens are considered to be social animals who may not be kept on their own. Chickens should ideally live in groups of at least five animals.

SPACE REQUIREMENTS

Whichever breed you choose, all chickens need space. They want to move, scratch, peck, sleep, and nest. This means that the more chickens you keep, the more space the animals will need.

Watch out: Some chickens can climb, and some can even fly! So, make sure their home is escape-proof – and break-in proof! Chickens are prey coveted by foxes and martens, in some places also by birds of prey. The coop and the run therefore must be adequately secured.



Also remember that chickens won't care much about your plants, your lawn or vegetable plot! They will happily dig up your garden and see the many greens as part of a yummy all-you-can-eat buffet. They will cherry-pick whatever they like best, regardless of whether it is actually meant for them or not. To help the soil recover, it is advisable to alternately block off some areas.

Trees and bushes serve to provide the chickens with shelter, hiding places and, most importantly, shade – indispensable, especially in sunny and warm weather. Certain plants are better suited for chicken runs than others. Some are unsuitable because they are toxic to chickens. Make sure you get advice in advance.

We recommend a minimum run area of 5m² (approx. 54 sq foot) per hen. More is even better, of course, but great variety through the use of trees, shrubs, herbs, hills, stones or running water is far more important than a larger, yet monotonous area.

COOP

The chicken coop should protect the chickens from wind, weather and above all from other animals (rats, martens, foxes, birds of prey, etc.). It will need a sufficient number of laying nests and perches for all the chickens, a sand bath and a grassy run. It is also advisable to place a droppings board under the perches, as the chickens tend to defecate at night. The droppings will land on the board and can easily be removed. Without a droppings board, the droppings will land on the bedding which then must be changed more frequently.



You can buy ready-made coops at hardware or specialist shops. However, it is worthwhile investing in better quality, as ready-made coops often have to be replaced quite quickly. When buying, you should pay less attention to optics and more attention to suitability.

The coop should not only be safe and secure, but also well-ventilated and at the same time draft-free. In addition, it should always provide free access to clean water.

Although chickens love snuggling up together at night, be aware that a bigger coop is better for the chickens, because they also sometimes like to use it during the day, especially if there is bad weather. A larger coop also has advantages for you: It is easier to access, and the daily cleaning is more comfortable.



De-dusted sawdust, hemp and linen are suitable for use as bedding; combine them with straw or spelt chaff for the laying nests. The chicken flock should feel safe and ideally be able to scratch around in their bedding. The larger the run with scratching options, the smaller the scratching area inside can be.

Small amounts of diatomaceous earth (also called diatomite, kieselguhr, celite or mountain flour) can be added to the bedding to protect against parasites. This fine powder should be added once a week and whenever the bedding is replaced. Daily cleaning of the shelter should be a matter of course, i.e. the faeces should be removed and, depending on the number of chickens, the entire bedding should be replaced regularly.

FEED

Ideally, the chickens should have free access to a feeder (available in animal and agricultural stores such as Landi), leaving it up to them when and how much they want to eat. The exception are rescued broiler chickens. In order to protect their heavyset bodies, they will need to be on a constant diet and their meals should be reduced to two per day. The rest of the time, they can find food in the soil to eat at their leisure. Of course, fresh clean water should be available to all chickens at all times.



As a restorative feed for rescued chickens, an additional vitamin cocktail of fresh, finely chopped apples (minus the seeds), oregano and garlic powder can be mixed into the feed. The feeders should be filled with grain mixtures or so-called crumble, enriched with herbs and garlic, if possible. Chickens are particularly fond of mint, marjoram, oregano, dandelion, nettles, chives, parsley, goutweed (ground elder), lemon balm, thyme, rosemary, sage, nasturtium, wild garlic, broadleaf plantain (plantago major), ribleaf (plantago lanceolata) and many other herbs. Chickens also appreciate the occasional treats and enjoy various fruits such as melons, apples (without seeds) or pears.

When the seasons change, you should give them a two-week course of mineral salts mixed in with their food. Laying hens can regularly become calcium deficient, which is why it is advisable to give them calcium supplements from time to time.

Chickens aren't waste recyclers, and many foods are even toxic for our feathered friends! **Under no circumstances** should they be fed the following:

- Raw nightshades like potatoes, tomatoes, aubergines
- Onions
- Avocado
- Apple seeds, banana peel
- Citrus fruits
- Dried or raw beans
- Chocolate, sugar, salt, coffee, peanuts
- Mouldy food

This list is NOT exhaustive!

WITH OR WITHOUT A ROOSTER

A rooster takes on many social tasks in the group. He provides peace and security, often attacks enemies directly, without regard for his own life, coordinates the goings-on of the flock, acts as a mediator and is a wonderful addition overall. However, a rooster will take his duties very seriously – and this includes regular loud crowing, which can often lead to neighbourhood disputes. All of a sudden, he is no longer welcome. As places for roosters are scarce, the result usually is the death of the rooster. So, please check in advance whether keeping a rooster is going to cause any problems. By the way, chickens lay eggs even if there isn't a rooster.



ARRIVAL OF THE CHICKENS



Numerous animal welfare organisations and animal sanctuaries will be looking to place ex-battery chickens. Those organisations will usually continue to provide you with advice.

Once the coop and the run are ready, the animals can move in. Do bear in mind that ex-battery chickens have special requirements at first. They often have scraggly plumage with many bald patches and will need protective shady spots in the summer and a source of warmth in the winter. Special infrared heat lamps are suitable for the latter. There are purpose-designed darkened infrared bulbs that do not disturb the chickens' sleep. Once they have fully recovered, they should be able to cope with any outside temperature themselves.

TRANSPORTATION

Any transport will cause the chickens stress. It is essential that they are transported gently in a large box with a sufficient number of air holes.



SETTLING IN



Give the animals time to settle into their new home. Check on the newcomers regularly. A security camera can do a good job; mobile cameras are available for little money, allowing you to watch what your feathery ladies are up to without disturbing them, using your smart phone.

If you already have chickens living with you, you should try to close off a small area in order to keep the new chickens separate for a few days. This gives you time to examine and care for the chickens, while it allows them to get used to the new environment. It also allows them to establish eye contact with the other chickens, so that by the time they come together, they are not complete strangers anymore. When it comes to finally bringing them together, make sure you do this at night, as chickens don't go for each other at night. It is quite possible that once outside the next morning, some might chase and pick at others. Don't intervene unless they draw blood, as this is how chickens decide on their pecking order and establish who is boss.

REGULAR TASKS

Even chickens generate work – but perhaps less than you might think.

Feeding	The feeders should be checked for dirt and refilled on a daily basis.
Water	The various water points should be cleaned and filled with fresh water on a daily basis.
Hygiene	Any droppings boards should be cleaned, the coop should be mucked out, and the run inspected and cleaned every day.
Disinfection of the coop	The coop should be disinfected from time to time, especially if you notice unpleasant odours despite having just mucked it out. This is usually a sign of bacteria at work. Only use suitable products that approved for chicken coop disinfection, and meticulously follow the instructions on the packaging.

In addition to chemical products, there are also numerous natural coop disinfectants. You can even work with beneficial organisms, for example by using predatory mites against red mites.

Get advice before you decide on what is best for you and your chickens.

HEALTH

Due to the massive overbreeding for factory farming, the chickens use up their physical resources far too quickly. As a result, their average life expectancy drops significantly. To offer the animals the best possible life for however long they have left, it is essential that you know about their main limitations. If you recognise the signals early on, you can help them in time in many cases.

General	Many of the former high-performance laying hens have brittle bones (osteoporosis) because they had little or no daylight. The high level of egg production, which requires a lot of calcium, leads to an additional deficiency. Enjoying the sun, being able to roam around outside, and high-quality food help to reduce these problems. In addition, you should add mussel extract to the feed. This helps to compensate for the lack of calcium and magnesium, which has a positive effect on bone regeneration.
Signs of diseases	Pay particular attention to nutritional status (e.g. too thin), posture (e.g. paralysis), plumage (e.g. sudden appearance of bald patches), breathing through the open beak (despite normal air temperatures), comb (not red), cloacal area (sticky) and cases of general drowsiness (cowering)..
Most common diseases	The most common diseases in chickens are parasites (mites, worms, bird lice), fungal infestations, bacteria, mycoplasma, viruses, peritonitis, egg binding, prolapse vent, coccidiosis, bone fractures (which they usually already suffer from on arrival), diarrhoea, and tumours. We recommend that you get more information about the respective diseases through further reading.
Veterinarian	Many veterinarians unfortunately have little experience with the treatment of poultry and therefore often advise euthanasia too quickly. However, a specialist can achieve a great deal using the right therapy. Before getting your chickens, find out which veterinarian in your area has experience with chickens and could be consulted in an emergency.

If chickens have enough exercise, activity options, sand baths and a healthy diet, they can develop a robust health profile, regardless of their origin and breeding. Most chickens are unlikely to have to see a veterinarian. Nevertheless, it is important to constantly monitor your chickens and consult experts if necessary.



PREVENTION

A clean, dry, and well-ventilated coop is essential for keeping chickens. A hygienic environment, good nutrition and plenty of light, air and access to greenery are the best prerequisites for a happy and healthy flock of chickens.

Regularly check the chickens' plumage and the faeces in order to spot any potential parasites. The faeces can vary slightly, depending on the diet, but should basically be firm in healthy chickens.

Specialist shops sell a range of products for disinfection and for combating parasites. Diatomaceous earth is often used as a preventive measure. The fine powder is scattered on the parasite retreat locations, i.e. on the floor of the coop, into the corners, nests and perches. Wear a dust mask when doing this. Should parasites still appear, you can sprinkle diatomaceous earth directly onto your patients. Again, wear a mask for this and make sure you protect the patient's head from the powder cloud. One treatment is sufficient in most cases, but persistent parasites will be history, at the latest, after you have massaged the powder between the feathers three times. Diatomaceous earth can also be added, in small amounts, to the feed or sand bath.

Vaccinations: There is no standard vaccination plan for chickens in Switzerland.

CONCLUSION



Chickens are wonderful creatures. They feel joy and sorrow just like we do and have distinct characters and characteristics. You can find every character trait: cheeky, shy, curious, reserved, adventurous, boisterous, naughty, and more. Chickens communicate; they dream, have an awareness of the self and are very capable of learning (though perhaps not always willing to!). Chickens can enter into relationships with humans just as dogs and cats do. Anyone who gets seriously invested in these animals is in for a real treat!

Helpful contacts: Animal sanctuaries are happy to advise on the adoption of rescued chickens.

Further literature: Silvia Jodas/Hellmut Woernle, Geflügel gesund erhalten, 2020.



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