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# How to Keep Chickens in a City ★

Join the "urban chicken movement" and raise your own backyard flock. Chickens are both fun and useful to keep. Don't expect to keep a breeding flock with noisy roosters, but your hens will earn their keep and provide enjoyment by laying eggs for you. Chickens can provide you with healthy, home grown eggs and meat, quality nitrogen-rich fertilizer, pest control and companionship. Perhaps surprisingly, a reasonable number of chickens can adapt very well to the constraints of an urban environment. It is even possible to keep chickens indoors through the use of diapers.



A backyard hen

## Steps

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1. Check local laws and regulations. It is now legal to keep chickens in the City of Brainerd which is covered by Brainerd City Code Section 900 available in print format at City Hall. Also, the City Code is on line at [www.ci.brainerd.mn.us](http://www.ci.brainerd.mn.us). There is a limitation on the number of domestic animals allowed on property in the City. Please check the City Code for details. Roosters are not allowed.
2. Research the breed and number of chickens you want to keep *before* you buy them! Be aware that many breeds also come in "bantam" size (like "toy" breeds for dog) that are roughly a quarter of the size of large breeds. The Buff Orpington makes a good choice for beginners and comes in both large and bantam sizes. Some friendly layers like Road Island Reds or Plymouth Barred Rocks are always a good choice. They are both meat and laying birds and they tend to be easy birds to keep, since they have a very mild temper. Another popular breed are Cochin bantams. These are good layers, are very sweet and make great pets. There is a ton of information available on the hundreds of breeds of chickens. Surf Google to look for chicken breeds, urban chicken, and city chicken just to start with. There are many online forums comprised of your fellow chicken owners, and they are a great resource for advice, chicks, adults birds and supplies. Some hatcheries also have online forums.
3. Visit other urban dwellers who keep chickens in their backyard and see what they're doing. Ask them for advice and suggestions. If you're the only person you know who is interested in doing this, visit the closest farmer who keeps chickens (especially if you've never had chickens before) and watch and learn. Pay a visit to your local farmers market, see who's selling fresh eggs, and start up a conversation!

4. Build your chickens a good coop out of strong materials. The coop is a place where the chickens will spend the night, lay eggs, and get out of the bad weather. There are many different types of coops. If you're handy, you can easily build one using a design you find on the Internet, or something you already have lying around. There are many different types of successful chicken coops that imaginative people have created, made from things as strange as an old pickup truck bed cap to a dog house. The key is to make your coop a **safe** place for the chickens to lay their eggs and sleep.



- It should have good air flow and somewhere for the chickens to perch.
  - Prepare adequately for your chickens for the whole year. They will need shade in the summer and heat in the winter. If you live where there are cold winters you may need to set up a heat lamp in the coop and make sure you have chosen a cold-hardy breed of chicken.
  - Protect against burrowing vermin such as rats and mice by burying about 6 inches of the fencing wire below ground level and curling it outwards. Then when pests try to dig under the wire to get in your coop, they run into the wire instead. Predators are very patient and have all night to get themselves a good chicken dinner, and chickens sleep very soundly.
  - Check your finished coop carefully for dangers such as protruding wires and nails. Chickens are very curious and it's cheaper to prevent accidents than it is to take them to the vet.
  - Build nest boxes where your chickens can cozy up and lay their eggs. A little bit of straw (not hay) to make a nest goes a long way.
5. Give your chickens room to roam. If you have a safely fenced yard or an off-street area, let them wander free during the day. If you give them a good spot to get out of the weather and up off the ground, they usually won't go very far from it. Often chickens prefer not to go anywhere they can't see their coop from. If you can't let them roam free, try making a little run for them out of hardware cloth (strong, welded wire fencing that has small, square openings--most hardware stores have it by the roll), or if you have to, you can keep them in the coop with a small run attached to it. Don't use chicken wire, as it is way too flimsy and is easily torn into by predators such as dogs, and even humans. Spend a little extra money on good fencing materials and save yourself the heartbreak of finding your birds torn to shreds one day.
  6. Purchase food for your chickens before they arrive. Feed supply stores are a good source as well as the Internet. You should have a bag of pelleted poultry feed (for large breeds) or crumble (for bantam breeds). Put the feed in a covered feeder and replace it regularly, as it does go stale. **Never let your chickens eat damp feed!** Chickens also love table scraps. They are effective weed eaters and insect control. Fresh and cracked corn is a favorite as well as tomatoes, apples and anything baked. Steer clear of giving your chickens onions and garlic, as it can flavor the eggs. Also, chocolate, raw potatoes, and avocados are toxic to birds and your chickens should never eat it. A good rule of thumb: if it's healthy for you, it's usually healthy for your chickens. Use common sense and keep pesticides, antifreeze and other chemicals out of your birds' reach. Clean up uneaten food before it spoils and stinks up their home.
  7. Find your chickens. There are many ways of finding local chicken

farmers. Ask around at farmers markets, health food stores and feed supply stores. Check the classifieds for a livestock section. The other option is to purchase your chickens online. Your county fair, 4H Clubs, county agriculture extension service--all are good starting points. You can even buy fertile eggs to incubate and hatch on your own! Hatching your own chicks is an amazing experience, especially for kids. If you decide to do this, be well prepared and do your research--it's fairly easy but you need to be prepared for those little balls of fluff.



8. Keep everything clean. Once every week or two (depending on how many chickens you have in how little space), clean out the coop, wipe down the perches, and scrub down their feeders. If they are laying, thoroughly clean their nest boxes, especially if an egg cracked at one point. Keeping their environment clean will also keep your neighbors from complaining.
9. Watch your chickens. Check the feed and water every day. Observe them regularly and look for changes in behavior and habits that will alert you to ways you can improve their habitat:
  - Are they eating their food and drinking their water? Always make sure the food and water are fresh, cool, and clean.
  - Are they huddling together in a particular spot? It might be too cold for them, or there could be a draft.
  - Are they breathing heavily? Check that they have enough shade to find a spot where they can cool off.
  - Are they losing feathers? The proverbial "pecking order" may be in effect. If any of the chickens are bleeding, consider separating it, as other chickens will continue to peck at the wound.
  - Are they all there? Count your chickens every day, especially if you have more than ten.
  - Be on the look out for signs of disease. Some possible symptoms to look for indicating injury/illness/disease include: Coughing, wheezing, labored breathing, warts/scabs, swollen joints, loss of feathers, reduced egg production, thin egg shells, fever, abscesses or open wounds, paralysis, twisting of neck/head, discharge from nose/mouth, diarrhea/blood in stool, not eating/drinking, weight loss, retarded growth, lack of coordination, enlarged abdomen.<sup>[1]</sup>

## Tips

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- Find an avian (bird) vet **before** you need one. 2AM Sunday morning is no time to be stuck running around trying to find someone to treat your chicken! (However, this is only important if you have show quality chickens. Find the local livestock veterinarian for mass problems. Otherwise, chickens take care of themselves pretty well if they have enough food, water, and space.)
- Find a "chicken sitter" if you ever plan on being away from your home for more than a day. Chickens

need to be tended to at least twice a day (to let them out of the coop or put them in, to check their food and water, etc.). If you're not around to do it, you need to get in touch with someone who's responsible and comfortable with this task.

- Buy a book on keeping chickens for reference.
- Tell your neighbors what you are doing. They are less likely to get upset over a wandering chicken in their yard every once in a while if they know where it came from. Better yet, turn them into allies and give them free eggs! You will likely end up with more eggs than you will know what to do with.
- Protect the outdoor run from hawks by draping bird netting over it and tying it down. Bird netting is very cheap and, without it, you are inviting hawks over for a daily feast.
- If there is no one in your area to buy chicks from, try mail ordering them. Keep in mind, you may have to order quite a few, but this will allow you to order just hens... and you don't need a rooster for good eggs!
- Try to keep your chicken hobby as cute and clean as possible. No one likes liking next to an ugly mess. By ordering plans to build a cute "city friendly"<sup>[2]</sup> coop or purchasing a ready made one, you fend off a lot of problems before you begin.
- Use fly traps and keep your coop really clean. If there is no smell the neighbors can't complain.
- Roosters are a liability in the city. The noise and trouble they create is usually not worth it. Hens lay lots of wonderful eggs - with or without a rooster.

## Warnings

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- Most people in an urban environment would rather you not actually try to cultivate a group of chickens in your backyard.
- Check online for plants in your yard that may be toxic, as chickens love to eat greenery and your garden is 'on the menu'! It follows that you should never use pesticide spray on or around plants that chickens may eat, and never use slug and snail killer pellets as they will kill your birds. Chickens naturally scratch and dig in the dirt with much gusto, so don't expect them to steer clear of your prize-winning petunia patch. If you don't want them to eat it and/or dig it up, fence it off.
- Roosters are loud! All male chickens love to crow and they do it in the morning, noon, night and every chance they get in-between. Keep that in mind if you have close neighbors. Hens, on the other hand, are not as noisy, but they DO cackle loudly here and there.
- Roosters are loud, but they serve a purpose - hens tend to be scattered and witless and roosters work to manage the herd in foraging and protect them from predators. Roosters also tend to decrease "hen pecking" - the abusive pecking inflicted on the runts of the roost.
- Chickens can carry diseases just like any other outdoor animal, so if you have very small children, make sure you monitor their contact. Tell them to wash their hands after petting them, and never kiss

them. Educate yourself on chicken health, including common diseases and parasites, many of which can be carried in by wild birds.

- **Consider what you will do with unwanted birds.** If you are hatching your own chickens, about half of them will be roosters. They can't be kept together because they'll kill each other and harm the hens as well. Likewise, if your main reason for keeping chickens is for the eggs, remember that chickens can live 8-10 years but only have a productive life (one egg every 1.5 days) of about 2-3 years. It's not easy to find homes for roosters and unproductive chickens, and usually your only option is to sell them for meat. However, keeping older chickens is often an option. They don't eat quite as much, but still produce delicious eggs. The roosters make good chicken jerky if you're ambitious. Be aware that rooster meat is pretty tough and would rarely make something like fried chicken taste good.

## Related wikiHow's

[edit]

- How to Protect Chickens from Feral Animals
- How to Keep Chickens from Eating Their Own Eggs
- How to Protect Chicken Combs from Winter Cold
- How to Collect Chicken Eggs
- How to Find Where Your Hen Lays Eggs
- How to Breed Chickens
- How to Hatch Turkey Eggs in an Incubator

## Sources and Citations

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1. ↑ <http://urbanchickens.org/chicken-illness-injury-and-disease>
2. ↑ <http://ubuilderplans.com>

- Try surfing for "urban chicken"; "city chicken"; "keeping chickens"; "chicken breeds"; "backyard chickens"; "hen house plans"

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## Authors

**Anonymous**, J.M. Delaney, Flickety, Versageek, Velvet Sparrow, Sondra C, Krystle, Jack H, Denis Camargo, Nicole Willson, John Comeau, Zack, Dave Crosby, Waited, Robster, Horses4Ever, Eric Wester, Travis Derouin, Bad Bertha, Tikuko, VanTucky, OhioMike

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