



Raising Turkeys

Housing

If you choose to raise turkeys indoors on floors that are cleanable, it will be easier to control predators and parasites. You'll need to have about six square feet of indoor space per bird. A separate building or a spare room in a barn or garage will work equally as well (see **Housing and Space Guidelines for Livestock** fact sheet for specific recommendations).

Another housing option is a simple structure with roosts (in addition to the six square feet per bird add a fenced-in (electric) yard after they're two months of age, providing 20 square feet per bird). This option is considered the most risky because you may not have a way to close the birds up at night to exclude predators and if they are exposed to the ground they may get blackhead disease.

Brooding Turkeys

Baby turkeys (poults), should be ordered from an NPIP certified hatchery. If you buy from a feed store, ask them if they buy from an NPIP hatchery.

You will need 1 square foot of brooder space per bird from 0 to 8 weeks of age.

Bedding:

Use wood shavings for turkey litter. **Do not use sawdust**, as the poults may eat it instead of their crumbles and starve to death. Do not use newspapers either, as sliding on the newspaper can cause splay legs in young poults.

Feed and Water:

Be prepared before the poults arrive. You will need a turkey starter feed for the first six weeks that has a coccidiostat in it to prevent coccidiosis. Some feed companies don't handle turkey starter feed — chick starter is a poor substitute as the protozoa that causes coccidiosis in chickens is not the same species that causes coccidiosis in turkeys. 100 lbs of turkey starter is enough for 10 poults for 6 weeks at which time they can be switched to

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a grower ration. Use cleanable waterers and feeders. Use feeders and water methods that keep poult from standing on top and defecating in them. They should be cleaned daily. **Note:** *organic certification prohibits the use of medicated feeds. Vaccinations are permitted. You can have the hatchery vaccinate the poults for an additional charge. HOWEVER, if you do this and then feed medicated feed, the effects from both the vaccination and the feed in combination will be cancelled out and the birds will not be protected from the protozoa.*

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Feeding and Watering birds upon arrival:

Just before birds hatch, they absorb the yolk in their egg and that yolk serves as the energy the bird needs for about 24 hours after hatching. Nature designed this process to ensure the birds could endure waiting for the rest of their siblings to emerge from their eggs before going out with their mother to learn to forage for food and water. We pick up birds when they are about a day old. Shipping can delay them getting to us. As a result, the birds will be hungry and will fill up on feed before water. That can result in pastings. So, to ensure they get the water they need to keep pastings from happening, only put water in the brooder to begin with. Then, spend some time with the birds for the first 5 hours or so, to be sure they find the water. It sometimes helps to dip their beaks in the water, or put colored glass marbles in the water trough so the birds will peck the marbles and learn to drink. Once the baby birds do start drinking, they can be given the starter ration, BUT never wait longer than 12 hours to introduce the starter.

Heat:

Turkey poults are going to need a temperature of 100° F. in a draft free brooder. A 250 watt infrared bulb works best for this as the red light warms without stopping the poults from sleeping. White light does interfere with sleep, and it is a fire hazard. It's important not to guess at the temperature. Place a thermometer down on the brooder floor for the first two weeks to ensure temperatures are correct at bird level. You can drop the temperature five degrees each week. The poults may need heat for up to six weeks of age. As the weeks progress, use common sense — if the weather is hot during the day, shut off the heat. If it cools down to the 30s and 40s at night, the birds will need extra heat. Always leave room for the poults to move away from the heat if it gets too hot. Once you have stopped using heat for your turkeys (when they have a nearly full set of feathers), you do not need any more artificial light. The normal daylight of summer and fall is enough for good growth.

Don't leave open water pails or boxes on the floor. Poults are very curious and have been known to jump into such a container - one on top of another, drowning or suffocating. There should be nothing in the room with the poults besides the feed, water and heat.

Once new turkey poults learn to eat and drink and warm themselves properly, they usually grow without difficulty from then on.

Keep Them Growing

When the turkeys reach six weeks of age, you should start using a turkey growing ration that contains a preventive medication for blackhead disease. Be sure to check the fine print on the feed tag to see if the feed is medicated for blackhead. This disease may show up anywhere and can be carried by chickens. Chickens are highly resistant to this disease, and blackhead can spread to turkeys from chicken manure. A good rule of thumb is to take care of the turkeys before taking care of the chickens each day to avoid cross contamination. Medicated growing rations should be fed until the turkeys are within 3-4 weeks of slaughter. Use unmedicated finishing rations for the remaining weeks. Most turkeys reach their mature size in six months. During that time, you can plan on the toms eating nearly 100 pounds of feed each and the hens nearly 60 pounds of feed each. *Keep a container full of course sand or fine gravel (grit) the turkeys can eat whenever they wish. Birds that are on dirt floors will find their own grit.*

Final note

Consult local zoning and building ordinances before beginning any household livestock operation. Laws and ordinances in some communities may restrict or prohibit such activities in your neighborhood.

Also, consider the impact of your home poultry operation on your neighbors. Use care in siting and constructing housing for your turkeys and develop a plan for manure management that will prevent odor and pollution problems.

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