

GIVE A HEN A HOME – HEN CARE SHEET



Congratulations on getting your new ex-free range or barn hens! If you're new to ex-bats/Free range, Barn hens or to hens in general, then this care sheet will go through all the basics you need to care for your hens properly.

THE HENS

Your new hens are the hybridwarren breed, and are approximately 16-18 months old.

They may be very pale with floppy or straight combs. Within a month, you should notice

that their faces start to become a lot pinker, and their combs may shrink and straighten up. Some of your hens may also be tatty or feather-bare. This is generally due to feather-plucking by other hens out of boredom. You will notice that they start to regrow their feathers fairly quickly once they get home, even the very bald hens. Their instincts come back very quickly, but their fitness may take longer. Given time, though, the vast majority of ex-battery, barn kept and ex free range hens make a great recovery.

THE FIRST FEW DAYS

When you get your hens home, it is vital that they are given some time and space to adjust to their new life. Remember, absolutely everything is new and frightening to them. When you get them home, pop them in their run with some food and water, and watch from afar, resisting the urge to pick them up and cuddle or play with them.

You may find that there is a little scuffling in the first few days. This is perfectly normal as they establish a pecking order (i.e. who is going to be the boss!). If there is excessive comb pulling, a little Vaseline smeared on can prevent the dominant hen from getting a grip. Some fighting can be avoided by having two or more food and drink stations and a place for the more timid hens to hide while they gain in confidence.

You may also find that egg laying tails off for a few weeks. This is perfectly normal while they adjust to their new environment, and should pick up again after a while. It may take a few days before they lay in a nesting box, rather than where they happen to be standing.

FOOD

Your hens are used to the same feed they have always had and it is best to stick to this whilst they adjust to their new life. They often don't recognise anything else as food, which can be worrying for a new owner. If you eventually want to feed them pellets instead of mash, you can add a few in at a time until the hens get used to them and accept them. As tempting as it is, it's best not to offer them any treats for the first week or so, to avoid stomach upsets. Eventually, they can enjoy treats (fed sparingly) such as corn, mealworms, fruit and veg, boiled/scrambled egg. Only feed treats in the late afternoon though, when they've eaten their 'real' food as in pellets/mash there are essential vitamins and minerals.

*The Free range hens we rehome have been fed pellets on the farm – The Barn hens have usually been fed on dry layers mash. Most hens seem to want to drink a lot when they first get home you can always dampen mash or pellets too.

GRIT

Grit comes in two forms – soluble and insoluble. Because hens don't have teeth, they need a constant supply of grit to enable their gizzard (a big strong muscle) to grind up their food ready for digestion. Soluble grit is often referred to as oyster shell and is absorbed by the hens' bodies to aid shell formation. Insoluble grit stays in the gizzard to aid digestion, until it is passed through their systems and replaced. Free-range hens often find enough grit on the ground, but hens who spend part of their time in a run will need it offered either mixed in with food or in a separate bowl/coop cup either way it's great to always have it available to them.

SUBSTRATE

You may want to use substrate in your run to give the hens something to scratch in and lie down on. Many people find woodshavings, Easichick or equine products like Easibed and Hemcore are great, and make poo-picking a lot easier. Dust-extracted straw or sawdust is perfect in nesting boxes. Bark chips are not recommended for the run because they often contain/harbormould spores which can affect delicate lungs, and hay is also not recommended in the nesting box for the same reason.

HEALTH

All your hens have been vaccinated as chicks before making it to the farm they lived at the common vaccinations are usually Salmonella, Newcastle Disease, infections bronchitis and Mareks Disease.

It is very helpful to get to know each hen and to perform a quick health check in the morning to make sure her crop is empty and her abdomen is her usual size. This will alert you to any potential health problems. You Worming - You should worm your hens, Ideally twice a year minimum- There are a few options for this using Verm-x Poultry Liquid or Pellet form or with Flubenvetchemical wormer . You can send of droppings samples to be tested for worm eggs so that you are only worming when needed and not giving chemicals etc when not required.

There is a lot of information online and in books about chicken health. The most common illnesses are:

- Impacted crop
- Sour crop
- Egg yolk peritonitis
- Egg binding
- Bacterial infections
- Worms
- Respiratory infection

If in doubt, SEE A VET. If your hens' droppings are looking runny or unusual, it can be worth sending a sample to be tested. Tests normally cost upwards £20 but early diagnosis can help. Two options for testing are Retfords Poultry Partnership (tel: 01777 703011) or www.chickenvet.co.uk, both of whom can test the sample and send out the correct medicines. Remember you have 5% discount with Lanes vets they have practices at Poulton, Garstang and Lancashire just mention your hens were rescued via Give a Hen A Home.

PREDATORS

Foxes are the natural enemy of chickens and even if you think you don't have foxes near you, in all likelihood you do. PLEASE be extra careful if your hens are allowed to free-range as a fox attack can happen at any time, day or night, and the results can be devastating. It is easy to get complacent, but 30 seconds is all it takes for a fox to kill a hen. If you are not with your hens (even if you are in the house) please keep them secure in a run, a fully enclosed garden or, with larger groups, electric fencing works very well.

Red mite is often the scourge of the hen owner, as it can be hard to get rid of. Not to be confused by the red spider mites we often see on our bricks in summer, red mite live in dark nooks and crannies of hen coops and come out at night to feed on the hens' blood. If your hens seem reluctant to go into the coop at night, or are miserable, hunched or pale, then you may have red mite. One way to check is to go out after dark with a torch and check inside the coop. Red mite will be visible crawling around. Another way to check is to run a clean white tissue under your perches and into the corners. If you see any red smears, you have red mite. There are numerous products for eradicating the mites if you search online, and diatomaceous earth powder is a good preventative.

Good luck with your new ex-battery/ex-free range hens and thank you so much for giving them the chance of a happy retirement! Please post some pictures of your girls in their new homes to the 'Give a Hen a Home' Facebook page.

For further information on some of the points above please take a look around our website and also see our additional links page.