

Brooding Basics



A brooder is the baby chick's home for the first few weeks of its life and will provide everything the hen does for her offspring after they hatch. The five main items needed for an effective set up are the brooder, bedding, waterer, feeder, and a heat source.

There are many different types of brooders available. You can build on yourself using anything from a cardboard box to a plastic storage bin, or you can choose to purchase one of the many different types available at retail outlets.

BROODERS

A build your own brooder can be a 40 gallon plastic bin, one gallon chick waterer, one quart chick feeder, a bale of pine shavings, a heat source and thermometer. Make sure the heat source is not close to the plastic bin and hangs directly over the bin so it is not a fire hazard!

Bedding

The most popular bedding options are pine shavings. While there are no studies that show cedar shavings are harmful to baby chicks, some studies show they can harm other small animals. Cedar shavings release a toxin that enters into the blood stream when inhaled. This prompts the liver to work harder to remove the toxin with the animal ultimately dying of liver failure. I don't want to take the chance when there are other options available.

Waterer and Feeder

Your baby chicks will need a constant supply of fresh water and feed. Because most brooders are smaller than coops, smaller feeders and waterers work best— I prefer 1 gallon waterers and 1 quart feeders. Try adding some marbles in the bottom of the waterer to attract the chicks to the waterer, prevent them from wading in, and even prevent drowning.

Depending on how high the sides of your brooder are, you can expect the baby chicks to attempt flying out as early as 7 days old. They start off by flying on top of the waterer or feeder, fly up to the rim of the brooder, and then out of the brooder and onto the floor. You can stop this by taping or gluing an inexpensive plastic funnel to the top of both the waterer and feeder to keep the chicks from landing. This will also block them from roosting on top and pooping in their feed and water. To prevent the chicks from flying out altogether, consider poultry netting or folding chicken wire across the brooder. This will not only prevent the chicks from flying out, but it will also discourage the house cat from having a quick snack while you are away.

HEAT SOURCE

The heat source you choose is very important. They can be safety hazards with fires, so you need to be careful about how you secure them, especially heat lamps.

Other Considerations

Pasty Butt— is a condition where feces sticks and hardens on the chick's vent and prevents it from eliminating waste/poop. Not all of your baby chicks will have this condition, but I've noticed that the same 3 or 4 chicks who have it today will probably still have it tomorrow when you check them again. Fortunately, the solution is simple. Just take a warm, moist paper towel and wipe the poop away just like you would a baby. The condition usually goes away within 3-4 weeks.

Chick Starter— The required feed for the brooder is chick starter. As with water, you want to have a constant supply of feed in the brooder at all times. There will be a considerable amount of waste in the first week, but as the chicks grow, you can raise the feeder and waterer by either hanging them or placing something under them depending on what kind of feeder and waterer you have.

Dip Breaks— If you purchase day old chicks from a hatchery and have them ailed to you, the first thing you want to do when they arrive is take them out one by one and dip the chick's beak into the feeder and allow it to drink some water. Next, dip the chick's beaks into the feeder. I like to do this because you are essentially playing the mother role and showing the baby chicks where its food and water source are for the next few weeks.

Cleaning— Your nose will tell you how often you need to clean the brooder. Depending on how many chicks you have, you may only have to clean it once every few days starting off. But as the chicks grow, you will need to clean it more often— possibly daily, or you can add bedding to it every so often, called using the 'deep litter method'

About the author

Andy Schneider, aka The Chicken Whisperer, hosts the popular podcast Backyard Poultry with the Chicken Whisperer and has authored The Chicken Whisperer's Guide to Keeping Chickens. Andy is also the national spokesperson for the USDA-APHIS Biosecurity for Birds program