How Chicks Grow the First Year

It is fascinating to watch how chicks grow, during the first year of their life. The downy chick goes through stages to become an egg laying hen or rooster. Starting at day one, from hatch, the little barely developed, downy chick grows quickly into an eating and growing machine. It takes a lot of growing and eating to become an egg laying hen!

During the first week, tiny feathers start to emerge on the chick’s wings. Within just a few weeks the small chicks have tiny feathers covering most of their body. The downy coat may still be there in some spots but most of it is gone by 5 weeks. Chicks grow incredibly fast.
As they grow the chicks appetite will increase also. The small feeder that took the chicks two days to empty now may be empty a few times during each day. You can increase the amount of food available to the chicks by adding a mason jar or plastic quart bottle to the feeder base. Still continue to provide free choice feed and room temperature water for the little flock. Chicks don’t know the difference between day and night and will feed all day long. They alternate between periods of waking and eating with periods of sleep.
Appearance makes a big leap around 10 weeks of age as the chicks enter the awkward phase of development. The chicks look like their legs are too long for their body. But the biggest appearance change you will see is in the feathers. Some of the down is still sticking around but now it looks like tufts of fuzz. The new feathers are growing bigger but often not as fast as the chicks body. All these factors combine to make the chick look like an awkward teenager.

Is that an Extra Large Pullet?

During this phase, you may start to notice that one of the chicks or more, look different than the others. At this time, you may be able to tell if a chick is a maturing rooster. Often, the cockerel or growing rooster will have larger feet,
bigger comb and will stand taller than the pullets. Of course the true answer will come with either the first egg or the crowing, at a later date.

The feathers continue to mature and the growth starts to slow at around 16 to 20 weeks. Your hens are close to maturity. Roosters may take longer to show full maturity and mating behavior. Usually, before the first year is reached, young roosters have claimed their favorite hens and are actively pursuing them during the day.

As a pullet gets closer to laying her first egg, she may squat down as you approach her. This is the way she will also act if she is willing to accept the breeding advances from the rooster.

What to feed as the chicks grow

Start the chicks off with a commercial chick starter feed. This ensures that they are getting everything they need for strong growth, bone development and feather growth. A lot is going on in that tiny body as chicks grow. They need a balanced diet in order to be a strong egg layer in just a few months. With so many options for starter rations on the market, I am sure you will find one that you are happy to feed to your new flock.

Medicated or Non-Medicated Starter
Feed?

The choice of feeding a medicated starter feed or a non-medicated feed is up to you. The medication in the starter feed is a mild coccidiostat. Often, newly hatched chicks will pick up cocci from the environment. This is a debilitating disease for a growing chick. Cocci are small protozoa. They act as a parasite in the chicks system, attacking the intestinal lining. This often causes runny, bloody diarrhea and death. The small amount of coccidiostat in the chick ration will prevent this. The decision is yours to make. Plenty of chicks grow up perfectly healthy without a medicated feed. I prefer to use at least one bag of medicated feed to ensure that the chicks have some protection.
Starter Feed Until Age 16 Weeks

Continue to feed a chick starter ration until 16 to 20 weeks of age. Feeding a layer ration too early in the development can lead to kidney problems and growth issues. The calcium and phosphorus levels are carefully maintained in the starter feed ration for the growing chicks. It is appropriate for the fast growth of bones and feathers in the non-laying birds.

Chicks are not interested in free choice calcium before they need it for egg shell development. The starter ration has the calcium they need for proper bone growth. Excess calcium will result in bones growing too fast and becoming thin and weak.
What is Scratch Feed?

The grain ration commonly called “scratch” is a mixture of cracked corn and oats and maybe one or two other grains. The chickens love it but it does not contain all the nutrients that a growing chick or a laying hen require. Using it as a treat is perfectly acceptable. Feeding only scratch to your flock is not going to meet all the nutritional needs of your birds.

Free Ranging
Depending on your set up, free ranging might be a safe option. Many chicks and hens are lost to predators, so keep that fact in your mind if you leave your flock to free range. It is still advisable for the optimal egg laying level, to feed some layer ration to your flock, too. The hens will lay more eggs if all of their nutritional needs are being met.

The Brooder Setup as Your Chicks Grow

Providing appropriate housing changes as the chicks grow. The
tiny fluff balls that live happily in a plastic bin during the first few weeks, soon find that their wings carry them out of the box. A next step in housing might be using a chick corral. Chick corrals stand about 20 inches tall and surround an area that you designate for the chicks to stay inside. I like to use a plastic child’s swimming pool, and surround it with the chick corral. This combines easy cleanup with a taller barrier to keep the chicks where I want them.

Eventually, as the chicks become fully feathered and the night time temperature stays above 50, the chicks can move to the outdoor coop. I still recommend that they stay separated from the existing flock as they gradually get to know one another. We often use metal fence panels, or dog crates to introduce the new flock members to the older chickens.
Don’t Rush the Transition to the Coop

I know that it is tempting to move the chicks to the coop earlier. If the chickens are not fully feathered, moving them to the coop without a heat source can lead to chilling and death. As each area of the country has different weather, I suggest you check with other chicken owners in your area and come up with a plan you are comfortable with. Often local feed stores will hold chicken workshops in the spring to help new chicken owners get comfortable with their new flock.

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