

Three Things Chickens Don't Need For Winter (and three that they do!)



When raising chickens naturally, there are three things chickens don't need for winter. I know it's hard to believe that chickens can and do make it through the winter months, even in very cold climates, without our interfering. How can a chicken possibly survive the cold and reach the warmer spring months healthy and happy? Because this happens over and over. [Chickens all over the world](#) weather the winter without these three things chickens don't need for winter.

What are these three things chickens don't need for winter? Heated coops, extra light in the coop, and warm winter clothing. Ok the third item is a bit of a joke. However, based on the popularity of several meme's floating around social

media, you would think that chickens are being mistreated if they aren't wearing the latest sweater vest. More on that later.



What are the Things Chickens Don't Need for Winter

Heat in the coop is a particularly touchy subject with some chicken keepers. When you live in an area that commonly experiences below zero, sometimes well below zero, temperatures for months at a time, you second guess your chicken's ability to stay warm. And you might add a heat lamp or other heating device to the coop, because it makes you feel better. I can't judge you on this. There have been a few times that I have also left a light on to add some heat, because I just felt better doing so.

If you absolutely must add a heat lamp to the coop, make a safer choice. This [lamp from Premiere](#) is rated safer and more

heavy duty for barn use. I knew the truth was, that they would be fine. But, we somehow occasionally fall into the trap of thinking chickens are like humans, or the family dog. Please be aware of the dangers of adding a hot light bulb to a coop full of birds, straw, and shavings.

Truth is, chickens are very well equipped to keep themselves warm. The downy under feathers fluff, trapping warm air against the body. The outer feathers keep the cold air from penetrating. If the chickens are on a perch, they will cover their feet with the belly feathers. What about the comb and wattles? Won't they be exposed and possibly have frostbite? Not if the coop is well built, has ventilation at the top and is draft free. The coop should not be air tight. In fact that would definitely lead to frost bite. The coop needs ventilation to carry the warm moist air up and out of the coop. Otherwise the moist air will lie on the surface of the combs, leading to frost bite. Frost bite looks like black blemishes on the chicken's comb.

But it gets dark so early!

Adding lights to the coop should be done only for your convenience. If you need to visit the coop after dark to tend to upkeep, check on the flock, or any number of chicken care duties, a light makes the task so much easier. If you are leaving a light on because you want to simulate longer daylight hours and hopefully get more eggs, that is taking away the natural break a chicken needs in the winter. Will it harm the chicken? Not directly. Will you receive more eggs than the person who does not add light to the coop? Yes. Is it worth it? That question will have to be answered by you.

Here's my thinking and I am not offering judgement here. This is a management style topic. If you choose to leave a light on in the coop for higher egg production, go for it.



What Do Artificial Lights Do to the Chickens?

I like to live as closely to the natural rhythms as possible. Chickens lay less in the fall and winter for a reason. First, starting in late summer, as the days begin to shorten, your chickens lose feathers in the [annual molt](#). The chicken yard

looks like a pillow fight occurred and the chickens look like plucked accident victims. As the days grow short, if the chickens have eaten enough [bugs or other protein](#) source, the feathers will be almost fully regrown. These new feathers are ready to keep them warm during the cold weather, approaching. Adding artificial light holds the chickens back from getting a natural break.

There's More Happening than Meets the Eye

Inside your chicken, other things are still going on. Your hens are recovering from rebuilding the feathers. Even though they may look smooth and glossy on the outside, the annual molt can take a toll on the inside. This is why egg production is still off. Left to their own time table, and with good nutrition, your hens will gradually regain the protein and calcium reserves that they need to produce eggs. Unless they are ill, egg production will naturally pick up again. You will notice this soon after the Winter solstice. The amount of daylight is a determining factor, don't misunderstand. I prefer to let the natural light shine through the Plexiglas covered windows in the coop. The hens will notice the gradual increase in daylight. And egg production will increase again.

Clothing for Chickens?

Clothing for chickens is not to be confused with the fabric hen saddles used to protect the hens backs from a large rough rooster. It's funny to see photos of chickens wearing the latest knitwear fashion, but in real life, wearing a sweater does more harm than good, when keeping a chicken warm. What actually happens is that the sweater will prevent the feathers from fluffing. The fluffing keeps the chicken warm by trapping the body heat near the body. I know people mean well but don't put clothing on your chicken to keep them warm.



What are the Things Chickens Do Need for Winter?

While there are three things chickens don't need for winter, we should remember the essentials that they do need.

Shelter, nutritious food, and fresh water are the keys to chickens thriving during the winter months. Spend some time cleaning the coop. Give the chickens a good thick layer of pine shavings and straw. You can line the nests with clean straw too. Clean out the cobwebs. Check the air flow. Is the ventilation carrying the air up to the roof vents? Tend to the structure, mending holes, cracks and other weak areas of the coop.

Check out this fun video!

Water is a necessary nutrient all year long. Making sure that your flock has a source of fresh water through out the day is hard when temperatures drop well below freezing. There are a number of products designed to keep the water above freezing.

Submersible water heaters, [heated bases](#) for metal waterers and electric heated bowls will all be helpful if you have electric power in the coop. In our coops without power, we pile dirt and straw up around the water bowl sides to insulate the bowl or water tub. The water will still freeze over night but it does take longer to freeze.

Nutrition is very important during times that your flock cannot forage for greens and insects. Feed a quality layer ration to make sure that the hens are getting the nutrients they need to sustain egg development. Supplement with healthy food from the kitchen or leftovers. And don't forget a healthy dose of meal worms or grubs to add some protein.



Have you decided to use any of the things chickens don't need for winter?



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Timber Creek Farm