

# Backyard Chicken Facts

Raising backyard chickens is a growing trend, but prior to the 1960's it was common to see small animals such as chickens and rabbits being raised on family properties to provide food.

Concerns about sustainable food production, community food security, ethical treatment of animals, and passing practical knowledge to our children, have inspired many people to grow gardens and keep chickens.

Today, raising hens for personal egg consumption is returning in both urban and rural areas across North America. As of 2014 there were 40 Canadian municipalities that allow backyard chickens.

Many more municipalities are choosing to develop by-laws that permit and regulate urban chicken keeping.

## The Benefits of Backyard Chickens

### Improving Community Food Security

- Fresh eggs are a perfect food, high in protein and most essential nutrients
- Laying hens can contribute nutritionally dense food almost every day
- Backyard chickens can help low income households eat healthy food
- Keeping your own chickens provides the opportunity to control food quality
- Raising chickens increases the amount of food grown in the community
- Learning to raise backyard chickens can inspire people to become new farmers

### Caring for the Environment

- 🐔 Chickens help recycle kitchen, garden, and yard waste
- 🐔 Chicken manure used as fertilizer greatly improves garden yields
- 🐔 Chickens can help control insect pests and unwanted plants
- 🐔 Backyard food production helps limit the carbon footprint of food shipping
- 🐔 Raising heritage breeds helps maintain biodiversity in agriculture
- 🐔 Chicken keeping helps teach children about our ecosystem and how to keep it healthy

### Better Health and Social Well-Being

- 🐔 Keeping chickens helps youth and adults better understand our food system
- 🐔 Producing food at home encourages self-sufficiency and self-determination
- 🐔 Backyard hens help promote food sharing and social interaction among neighbours
- 🐔 Chickens can be companion animals which contribute to mental health by reducing loneliness, isolation and depression, as well as foster social activity
- 🐔 Chickens can provide entertainment to all ages
- 🐔 Raising chickens can help teach children biology, and caring for animals

# Backyard Chicken Safety

## Disease

The Centre for Disease Control lists Salmonella, Campylobacter, E-coli, Botulism, West Nile Virus, and Avian Flu as pathogens that can be carried by backyard poultry and potentially transferred to humans. But in North America, occurrences of humans contracting these illnesses from chickens are extremely rare with the exception of Salmonella.

**Salmonella** is not an airborne organism and so the only way to contract salmonella is to ingest the bacteria by eating undercooked meat, raw eggs, through poor food handling, or touching animal feces and then putting hands near mouth.

The risks associated with Salmonella in backyard chickens can be mitigated, as with handling eggs and poultry from the grocery store, by fully cooking eggs and meat and by hand washing after handling live chicks or chickens.

It should be noted that salmonella can also be contracted from common household pets such as cats, dogs, reptiles, and amphibians.

## More on Avian Flu...

There has been a great deal of media hype surrounding the risks of avian influenza.

Avian flu is extremely common among wild bird populations especially in migratory waterfowl. Most lakes contain strains of avian influenza.

Occasionally, more highly pathogenic strains develop in large commercial flocks if infected by wild birds. But this happens very rarely and the real risk is that other commercial operations can be affected. In North America, there has yet to be any case of a highly pathogenic strain of avian influenza infecting humans.

## Chicken Health

Chickens are susceptible to many poultry specific diseases.

However, most backyard flocks will rarely experience serious illness.

Problems can be avoided by starting with healthy birds and maintaining good management practices.

Purchasing chicks or young pullets from a reputable seller is the best way to ensure birds are healthy from the start. Bringing older hens home can expose a flock to illness because chickens can potentially carry a contagious pathogen without showing symptoms.

Backyard chicken keepers should prevent their flock from coming into contact with other chickens and ask other chicken keepers to wear clean footwear and clothing when visiting.

Waterers, feeders, and coops should be kept clean.

Be aware of chicken illnesses and watch for signs of infection.

Prevent wild birds from coming into contact with your flock.

Chickens that do get sick can be treated with home remedies, by a veterinarian, or culled and disposed of in accordance with local regulations. Pet cremation services are available in many communities and can ensure that disease organisms are destroyed.

## Spent Laying Hens

Chickens lay well for several years but eventually stop laying.

Spent laying hens can be fed and cared for like any other pet and can still provide great garden fertilizer, eat insect pests and entertain with their antics.

For those who wish to replace their spent laying hens, older hens can be taken to an abattoir or processed at home where regulations permit. Older hens are excellent as soup or stewing birds.

Backyard chicken keepers should plan ahead to ensure they know what to do when their birds stop laying eggs.

## Selling Eggs

Ungraded eggs can be legally sold from the owners' premises provided that the consumer does not use the eggs for commercial purposes. Eggs must be clean and not cracked.

Selling surplus eggs from home can help offset feed costs as well as help foster good relationships with neighbours.

# Chickens are Good Neighbours



## Noise

It is generally recommended that roosters be prohibited in urban neighbourhoods due to their loud and frequent crowing.

Hens do make noise during egg laying which lasts about five minutes. The typical noise volume of a squawking hen measures 63 decibels at 0.3 metres. For comparison, a barking dog may register 100 decibels at the same distance.

## Odour

There is virtually no odour from chickens if proper manure and coop management is maintained. With the low numbers recommended for backyard flocks, odours strong enough to escape a typical backyard are unlikely to develop, even with less than satisfactory coop cleanliness.

## Nuisance Wildlife

Chickens can attract predators such as raccoons, skunks, and weasels. Rodents such as squirrels, mice, and rats can be attracted to improperly stored chicken feed.

These creatures are, however, already present in great numbers within cities and are attracted by poorly stored human food and food waste, as well as wild bird feeders. Properly stored chicken feed and well built coops will prevent the backyard from becoming a haven for nuisance animals.

## Manure and Nutrient Management

Proper manure management is critical to controlling nutrient run-off, disease risks, odours, and flies. Small scale commercial operations as well as backyard flocks can contribute to environmental pollution if there is excessive bird density and poor manure management. Most backyard chicken by-laws restrict the number of birds permitted in backyard flocks. This dramatically reduces the risk of environmental pollution from backyard chickens.

A typical hen will produce about 7 kg (wet weight) or 2.5 kg (dry weight) of waste per year. It is important to keep chicken manure dry using coop litter such as wood shavings or straw.

Composting used litter and manure produces high quality fertilizer for vegetable and flower gardens while preventing nutrients from leaching away.

Proper composting also destroys disease organisms.

For comparison, the average dog produces 17.5 kg (wet weight) per year which is rarely allowed to dry in litter or composted, meaning that nutrients are released into the environment through run-off or through sewage treatment systems.

With chickens and common household pets, it is important to observe set-backs from dug wells and water courses.

## Coops

A properly built coop will help keep chickens safe, healthy, and odour free. Chicken coops can easily meet current by-law regulations concerning set-backs and size for urban out-buildings, while still providing the necessary shelter and amenities. For an average sized hen, a coop should have a minimum of 0.4 square metres per bird available. Fenced runs are recommended for allowing birds access to the outdoors while protecting them from predation. Chickens are not known for straying far from home should they inadvertently leave their enclosures.

# Sources



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## **Municipal Precedent**

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## **Urban Wildlife**

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## **Zoonotic Disease**

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