

Winter Care of Backyard Chickens

By Mira Kelada

Backyard chickens are wonderful additions to any farm. However, they do require some extra care during the winter months. During the winter, there is a higher likelihood for chickens to contract frostbite and experience respiratory illnesses as well as behaviour problems. Being aware of these potential problems and employing winterizing strategies can mitigate winter health issues.

Several breeds are more suitable for tough cold winters compared to others. Breeds such as the Chantecler, Dominique, Hamburg, Wyandotte, Jersey Giant, Orpington, Plymouth Rock, Rhode Island Red, and Light Sussex are more adapted to winter weather due to having thicker feathers and combs that can withstand the cold. However, the Peace Region can experience extremely cold weather that make even hardy breeds susceptible to frostbite.

Frostbite affects the wattle, comb and toes of chickens. Initially, you may see that combs and wattles turn pale. Eventually, they may turn black, swell and shrivel. Frostbitten regions may eventually fall off. To prevent frostbite, reduce the humidity in the coop by cleaning out manure and ensuring proper ventilation so that moist air can escape. Monitor the amount of time that chickens spend outdoors, especially during severe cold spells. If a chicken happens to moult in the cold weather, make sure it stays indoors and provide an extra heat source (heat lamp for example) as well as extra protein in the feed. If you are concerned about frostbite on individual chickens going outdoors, apply petroleum jelly to their wattles and combs as a preventative measure.

Winterizing the chicken coop can also help prevent frostbite and other illnesses that chickens may experience in the winter. When chickens roost, their feet overhang and are more prone to getting frostbite. Building a wider roosting perch can prevent frostbite. Additional winterizing techniques include positioning the chicken house to reduce wind exposure, ensuring the roof is sturdy enough to withstand snow, and placing windows to the south to capture more light during the winter months. As mentioned previously, chickens will require a heat source within the coop.

If the weather is very cold and chickens are kept indoors, they will need some environmental enrichment. Chickens that were previously allowed outside but must be kept inside can show behaviour problems such as feather pecking. Creating a dust bath inside the coop with sand or peat is a good distraction for chickens. Other potential enrichment includes dangling strings from the ceiling and adding ramps with grip inside the coop. Another idea is to hide treats within straw bales and let the chickens scratch the straw. Playing classical or jazz music has been known to calm birds as well.

Eggs can freeze in the winter if the coop is not kept warm enough. Frozen eggs resemble hard boiled eggs with cracked shells. Collect eggs often to prevent breakage and supply a heat

source in the coop. If you need your chickens to lay eggs all year round, you will need to supply supplemental light during the winter months. Chickens need 14 hours of daylight per day to stay in production.

If you have questions regarding care of you chickens during the winter months, don't hesitate to contact a veterinarian. Additionally, the University of Alberta's Poultry Research Centre has published an excellent guide to raising chickens. This guide can be found at the following website: <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/9780773261174>