



Handling Baby Poultry

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With an increase in backyard poultry raising, and even keeping poultry as pets, it is necessary to keep in mind proper health concerns in handling baby poultry. Chickens, ducks, geese, turkeys, peafowl, and game birds can harbor and transmit certain agents that might infect people. This fact sheet will review practices that will help minimize the chance for disease transmission between you and your poultry.

Diseases transmissible from animals to humans are known as zoonotic diseases. Poultry are not unique in carrying organisms that can potentially cause illness to people. There are over 860 known zoonotic diseases; poultry have been known to harbor at least 20 of these. Thankfully they occur rarely or not at all in recent times.

The following are guidelines that will minimize the chance of acquiring illness from baby poultry.

Always purchase chicks and poults from a National Poultry Improvement Plan (NPIP) certified hatchery. Reputable feed stores and poultry suppliers make sure they sell only young poultry originating from NPIP certified sources. This assures that the birds arrive free of certain poultry-specific diseases that could weaken the young birds and allow the acquisition of other infectious agents that could be transmissible to human beings.

Good husbandry practices are essential for keeping the young healthy. Remember that chicks cannot generate enough body heat to keep themselves warm. This is the reason in nature the mother hen keeps her young close to her body. If the hen is not available, we must assume the role of providing sufficient heat. This process is called brooding. The brooding period, before the young can grow feathers and generate sufficient body heat, lasts about 4 weeks for most poultry species. A heat source, such as a gas poultry brooder stove or infrared heat lamp, is necessary during this period. Generally, chicks should be kept in an environment that allows a temperature gradient between 115°F to 85°F for the first few days. The temperature should be decreased by about 5°F each week thereafter. Ensuring enough space underneath (or around) artificial heat sources will allow chicks to find and move to temperature zones as needed.



Place the chicks on a clean bedding source, such as pine or cedar shavings. The bedding will absorb moisture and feces thereby helping to keep harmful organisms away from the chicks. Quickly remove any caking of litter and add additional clean dry bedding as necessary. Bedding and litter should be removed and the area disinfected between groups of baby poultry.

Use good quality feed – preferably feed formulated professionally from a reputable manufacturer. Certain disease organisms, most commonly *Salmonella* or *E. coli*, can be harbored in feed if high quality ingredients are not used or if the feed is not handled properly. Keep feed off the ground in properly constructed and elevated troughs or buckets. Rodents and other vermin are attracted to chicken feed. Store the feed in such a way that scavengers cannot gain access. Feed only enough at a time for the chicks to reasonably consume within a day or two. Chick feed exposed to the elements can lose its nutrient value and spoil.

If feasible, wear disposable exam gloves when handling chicks. Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water after finishing, being especially careful to remove all dirt and debris. Alcohol-based or other effective hand sanitizers should be applied after washing.

After chicks are moved out of the brooder, properly dispose of the used litter by approved local methods. An ideal way to use the litter is to compost it and apply to the home garden. There are excellent publications that teach how to properly

compost backyard wastes, and poultry litter can be a part of this process.

Poultry keeping can be a source of pleasure in addition to providing a ready source of eggs and meat. It must be emphasized that most zoonotic poultry diseases are not common enough to discourage the enthusiastic pursuit of this interesting pastime. Proper handling of chicks will enhance that pleasure by helping to keep both you and your chicks healthy.

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