

# Producing Turkeys for Show



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**T**urkey projects are popular with 4-H and FFA members. Turkeys are usually shown at 18 to 22 weeks of age. Many counties and communities have market turkey contests in annual youth livestock shows. Youth also can exhibit in the Houston and San Antonio Livestock Shows. Surplus turkeys can be consumed at home or sold locally.

A successful turkey exhibitor must:

1. Observe all show rules and regulations governing the purchasing and showing of turkeys.
2. Purchase pullorum-typhoid clean poults.
3. Use top-quality feeds.
4. Follow recommended management practices during the entire brooding and growing period.
5. Cull birds closely and select the show entry properly.

## Purchasing Poults

Most youth livestock shows have rules and regulations governing the turkey show. Make certain all show regulations are followed when ordering and raising poults for a show. State law requires that turkeys

shown in Texas must come from pullorum-typhoid clean flocks. Check with the county Extension agent, an adult leader or an agricultural science teacher for instructions and requirements.

Turkeys raised for show will be from one of several commercially available, high quality, heavily muscled white strains. Generally, three to five outstanding turkeys will be found in every 50 birds started. Individual projects should consist of at least 10 poults. Keep a record of all expenses and receipts.

## Housing

Expensive housing and equipment are not necessary. However, a clean, dry structure that can be well ventilated, a brooder or heat lamps to warm the poults, and feeding and watering equipment are needed. Openings on three sides of the building provide plenty of fresh air for the birds. Plastic sheeting can be used to close sides during brooding and in cold weather. Make certain the floor is at least 6 inches above ground level to prevent flooding. The roof overhang should be sufficient to effectively protect against blowing rain.

**Space** is critical. Poults require 2 square feet of floor space through 4 weeks of age and 6 square feet from 4 through 8 weeks of

age. By 12 weeks of age, hens must have at least 7 square feet, and toms at least 10 square feet, if they are to make good show birds.

## Preparation and Brooding

**C**lean and disinfect the turkey house, feeders and waterers at least 2 weeks before poults arrive. Wash the house down with a pressure hose; then spray with a disinfectant labeled for use in poultry houses if the structure has previously been used for housing poultry. Eradicate all rodents and insects using approved pesticides.

Before the poults arrive, put 4 inches of litter on the floor of the cleaned, disinfected pen or house. Wood shavings, cane fiber, ground corn cobs, peanut hulls or rice hulls make good litter. Washed builder's sand will work; dirt will not. **Hay makes very poor litter.** Stir the litter daily after the second week to prevent packing. Hard, damp areas in the litter will cause breast defects. **Never place poults on a slick surface such as newspaper, plastic, butcher paper, etc.** Have extra litter available for an emergency such as a water leak.

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Construct a cardboard brooder guard (brooder circle) to keep poults near heat, water and feed. The brooder guard should be 18 inches high and must be a minimum of 5 feet in diameter for 50 poults. When poults are 7 days old, remove the guard and allow them full freedom of the pen.

Electric heat lamps (infrared bulbs) are good heat sources for brooding poults. Two 125-watt bulbs per 50 poults are recommended. Make certain lamps are secured so they cannot fall to the litter and create a fire hazard. The lamps should hang so that the bottoms are 18 to 24 inches from the litter.

Lamps can be raised or lowered depending on the temperature conditions. Place waterers a good distance from the lamps to prevent splashing water from cracking the hot bulbs.

If a gas or electric hover-type brooder is used, it should operate at a temperature of approximately 92 to 95 degrees F. Gradually reduce the temperature 5 degrees each week until the poults are 3 to 4 weeks old or until the house temperature reaches 70 degrees F.

When poults are comfortable, they will bed down in a semi-circle around the perimeter of the heat zone. If cold, poults will crowd under the heat source. If too warm, they will move to the outer limits of the brooder guard.

After poults are 4 weeks old and fully feathered, heat is seldom required. In warm weather, give poults adequate ventilation during the day. Older turkeys may need mechanical ventilation for cooling.

## Lighting

Keep the poults well lighted, day and night, during brooding. When heat lamps are removed, a 25-watt or 40-watt light bulb can be used as an attraction light until the birds are 12 weeks old; then remove all lights on hens. Do not confine hens near a guard light. Long daylength periods stimulate hens into early egg production. This damages fleshing and finish, reducing their attractiveness as show birds.

## Feeding

**O**ptimum performance of turkeys depends on proper nutrition. **It is absolutely essential that poults receive a quality turkey starter containing at least 26 percent protein.** Lower protein starter feeds, such as broiler feed, are not adequate. Feed poults the starter for the first 12 weeks. Some exhibitors feed starter until show time if a withdrawal period is not indicated on the feed tag. Others feed turkey finisher or broiler feed after the birds are 12 to 16 weeks old.

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Feed particle size is important in the nutrition of young turkeys. Crumbles are good because there is little or no separation of feed ingredients. Heat required for pelleting increases digestibility; therefore, poults consume more while wasting less feed.

Early leg problems can be minimized by adding inexpensive water-soluble poultry vitamins to drinking water. Do not exceed the recommended dosage. **Do not** add vitamins after poults are 1 week old.

Order feed and vitamins at least 2 weeks before poults arrive to ensure availability of fresh turkey starter and a poultry vitamin package.

Use cookie sheets and gallon chick waterers to feed and water young poults. Use tube feeders after 7 days because they hold an ample supply of feed, can be adjusted easily as turkeys grow and are less likely to cause bruises than horizontal trough feeders. Many exhibitors use automatic waterers. Adjust feeders and waterers so that the trough portion is level with the back height of the birds.

Keep feed before turkeys at all times to attain maximum growth. Maintain adequate feeding and watering space. Turkeys respond to attention. Walk turkeys briefly and slowly to provide exercise, and stir feed two to four times per day to increase feed consumption and growth.

Small amounts of feed moistened with milk and cooking oil and fed several times during the day may stimulate older birds to eat more and increase growth. This practice can be particularly helpful in hot weather with turkeys older than 16 weeks. **Caution:** Moisten the feed and immediately feed it. Wet feed swells rapidly and effective intake can be reduced. After 8 to 10 minutes or when turkeys cease eating, remove and dispose of any uneaten moistened feed.

## Flock Health

**K**eep all backyard fowl away from turkeys at all times.

Post-hatch stresses can lead to early health problems. To help prevent this, a broad spectrum antibiotic is often added to the water for the first 72 hours of brooding. Follow directions on the label and do not over-medicate.

Vaccinate poults for fowl pox at 8 to 10 weeks of age. In areas with high mosquito populations, poults should be vaccinated initially at 3 to 4 weeks followed by a second vaccination at 12 weeks of age to ensure lasting immunity.

Turkeys can and do get sick. Some common health problems of turkeys and suggestions on how to deal with them are discussed below.

- Respiratory infections are usually treated with a broad spectrum antibiotic labeled for poultry use.
- Coccidiosis outbreaks (bloody diarrhea) can be controlled with Amprolium® or other poultry coccidiostats.
- Thirsty poults can consume excessive amounts of water when first placed in the brooding area or if allowed to run out of water. A reaction known as “water glut” can cause affected poults to stagger and go into convulsions. Monitor the water supply carefully.
- Turkeys kept in a clean pen seldom have worms. If intestinal worms are detected, treat with an approved worming compound.
- Check turkeys monthly for parasites. Pay particular attention to skin around the vent area. Control external parasites (lice, mites, etc.) with applications of Sevin® dust.
- Fire ants can cause skin blisters and must be controlled around turkeys. Drench mounds with an approved insecticide, or treat the general area with an approved bait. Do not allow poults access to this material.

- Cannibalism can be controlled by clipping one-third of the upper beak. Cauterize the cut by touching with a soldering iron to stop bleeding.

## Culling

Close culling is essential to reduce social conflict and to promote maximum growth and fleshing. Continually cull young turkeys by removing unthrifty and crippled birds to provide more space for the better birds. Severely cull turkeys at 10 to 12 weeks of age. Remove those with conformation defects (back and hip abnormalities, excessive taper of breast, poor breast width, sloped breast, etc.). Keep only two or three birds for each one to be shown. Leg band these birds for easy identification. Separate males and females, then leave the birds alone. Frequent handling will injure birds or force them off feed.

## Handling and Transporting

Turkeys selected for show should only be handled when necessary.

1. Never catch or pick up a turkey by the wings or by one leg.
2. When catching a turkey, gently crowd it into a small area. Then, quickly bend over and grasp the shank of the nearest leg while at the same time reaching across the bird's back to grasp the opposite shank with the other hand.

Lift the bird clear of the floor in one quick motion.

With a shank in each hand, the head should hang down and the back should be against the holder. In this position, the selector can easily examine all parts of the bird. The bird may flap frantically, so hold it clear of all objects to prevent it from bruising or breaking a wing.

3. Make the final selection just before leaving for the show. Examine birds for defects and insects. Eliminate those with cuts, bruises or insect bites. Select an alternate bird in case something happens to the first choice.
4. Place adequate litter or straw in box, coop or trailer floor to protect against bruises when transporting birds. Never tie a turkey's legs together.
5. Keep the bird cool and adequately ventilated.
6. Keep toms and hens separate.
7. **Never handle mature birds by the wings or drumsticks.** Always put an arm over the wings and clasp the shanks in your hands when carrying a bird.
8. Check entries one last time for defects just before presenting them to the sifter.
9. **Always handle turkeys gently.**

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