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Poultry Facts: Turkey Brooding and Management: Giving Poults a Good Start

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Bulletin #2187, Poultry Facts: Turkey Brooding and Management: Giving Poult a Good Start

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The saying “*What starts right, ends right*” holds true for turkeys. If you give your young poults a good start, chances are you will have very few problems, if any. Here are a few pointers that will help you grow a successful flock.

1. Decide early on the variety you want. “Large White” and “Broad Breasted Bronze” are large birds. The toms (males) of these breeds can reach 25 pounds in 24 weeks, but earlier harvesting is possible based on carcass size preferred by customers or family needs. “Small White” will reach 14 pounds in 16 weeks (see Table 1). Heritage breeds can take longer and the percent breast meat in the carcass is less than “Small White”. White feathered breeds usually provide a cleaner-looking processed bird.¹

| Age (weeks) | Large White or Broad Breasted Bronze | | Small White | |
|-------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| | Live Weight (lbs.) | Cumulative Feed (lbs.) | Live Weight (lbs.) | Cumulative Feed (lbs.) |
| 4 | 1.65 | 2.3 | 1.45 | 2.2 |
| 8 | 6.20 | 10.9 | 4.40 | 7.7 |
| 12 | 11.60 | 23.9 | 8.30 | 17.8 |
| 16 | 16.50 | 41.4 | 12.10 | 31.2 |
| 20 | 21.10 | 63.6 | — | — |
| 24 | 25.10 | 85.7 | — | — |

Table 1: Turkey Varieties Growth & Feed Chart

Source: L. S. Jensen, Turkey World, January 1977.

2. Buy your poults from a reliable source (an NPIP-certified hatchery) to guarantee good quality, healthy birds. Stick with one source of your poults. Do not mix poult sources.

3. Clean and disinfect housing facilities. Scrub walls, ceiling, floor, and all equipment clean. Allow the pen to dry thoroughly. Equipment such as feeders or waterers may be soaked in a 10% solution of household bleach to kill germs after all dirt and manure has been removed.²

4. Separate poults from chickens and other birds. Some diseases spread between bird types, but while chickens show no signs of the disease, turkeys may develop a serious disease problem (for example, blackhead and chronic respiratory disease).

5. Don't mix birds of different ages. Different ages have different nutritional needs. Younger birds are also more apt to come down with diseases. Mixing different aged birds creates unnecessary competition for space, water, and feed.

6. Provide the appropriate floor, feeder, and waterer space. Adequate feed and waterer space ensures all birds have an opportunity to eat and drink freely (see Table 2).

| Age (weeks) | Floor (square foot) | Feeder (linear inches) | Waterer (linear inches) |
|-------------|---------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| 0 – 8 | 0.8 – 1.0 | 0.5 – 1.0 | 0.5 – 1.0 |
| 8 -16 | 1.5 – 2.0 | 1.0 – 2.0 | 1.0 |
| 16 – 20 | 2.0 – 2.5 | 2.0 | 1.0 |
| To Market | 3.0 – 5.0 | 2.5 | 1.0 |

Table 2: Average Space Requirements Per Turkey by Age

7. Start and raise turkeys on litter, wire floor or slats. If poults will be started on litter, cover the brooding area with at least two inches of clean, dry, and absorbent litter material, such as pine wood shavings. Do NOT use sawdust, newspapers, hardwood shavings, cedar shavings, or hay.

8. Keep young poults warm. They are very sensitive to cold. Check the brooder at least 24 hours before the poults arrive and adjust to 95 to 98 degrees F at two to three inches above the litter surface for the first two weeks. Decrease temperature by five degrees F each week until it reaches 70 degrees F, and maintain this level until extra heat is no longer needed (usually at 6 to 8 weeks of age). Use a brooder guard, which will give poults room to move away from the brooder, if needed. There are infrared heaters that can easily be used to keep poults warm. If heat lamps are used, be careful to secure them safely to prevent the chance of fire.

9. Provide air flow. It is as important to have adequate ventilation without drafts for good air quality as it is to keep the brooder warm. As the poults grow and warmer weather nears, ventilation is even more important. Confinement-raised turkeys need at least 0.05 cubic feet per minute (cfm) per pound of body weight to keep air fresh and remove excess heat.⁴ Proper ventilation also helps to move fresh air to the birds and removes ammonia from the house.

10. Feed them right. There are many turkey feeding programs available. A simple plan is shown in Table 3. Always use fresh feed that has been stored in a dry, cool place for no more than four weeks. Feeds that are stored longer than one month increase the risk of toxic molds in the feed. Younger birds require a feed with a higher protein level. Protein builds muscle.

| Age | Type of Feed | Feed Consumption per Bird (cumulative amount) ⁵ |
|--------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| First 6 to 8 weeks | Turkey Starter (28% protein) | 10.9 lbs. |
| 8 to 12 weeks | 22 % protein | 25 lbs. |
| 12 to 16 weeks | 19% protein | 44 lbs. |
| 16 weeks to market | 16 % protein | 63 lbs. |
| 20 weeks to market | 16% protein | 116 lbs. |

Table 3: Turkey Feeding Program

11. Use medicated starter and grower feed. Turkeys are more susceptible to a number of avian diseases that chickens and other poultry can tolerate. Therefore, turkeys should not be raised with other poultry.³ Coccidiostats (medicines that combat coccidiosis) specifically for turkeys, can be fed in starter and grower rations until 12 weeks of age. Starting with disease-free poults; providing a clean, dry, bio-secure pen; and good management is the best defense against disease. Medicated feeds are not permitted for organically raised birds.

12. Provide enough clean, cool water at all times. Waterers should be cleaned and disinfected on at least a weekly basis. Biofilms grow on surfaces where water sets for long periods of time. Scrubbing with a solution of dish detergent and rinsing with fresh water is necessary to remove biofilms.

13. Provide adequate lighting so poults can find feed and water. If poults are raised inside, make sure there is adequate natural light (windows or skylights). In addition, electric lights would be handy for the birds on dark or cloudy days and when you need to check the birds at night.

14. When brooding, round off all corners of the pen with wire netting, wood, or cardboard. This will prevent piling and smothering of poults.

15. If you decide to have roosts, allow three inches/bird. (Roosts are optional for turkeys.) Turkeys do roost naturally. However, roosts can be the cause of leg injuries when birds hop from the roost to the floor. Turkeys perform quite nicely without roosts.

16. Take precautions to reduce pecking injuries. Turkeys peck each other, which sometimes results in serious injuries and death. Following good management practices reduces the risk of pecking. Avoid crowding and overheating and provide sufficient feeder

and drinker space, feed, and water. The wounds of pecked turkeys can be covered with an anti-peck paste, which can be obtained from feed stores. Isolate pecked birds from other turkeys until wounds have healed.

17. Observe the birds for a time each day. Look at every individual bird. Watch for any unusual signs such as dead birds, downed birds, separated birds, limping, blood, and birds not eating or drinking. These may signal an injury or a disease problem. Besides sight, use your sense of smell and hearing when evaluating your birds.

18. Check local ordinances. Check with your town office or city hall to determine if there are any restrictions on keeping birds in your area.

If you have questions about disease prevention, vaccination or management practices, contact your local veterinarian or UMaine Cooperative Extension County Office.

Sources

¹ Mulhollen, J. Heritage Turkey Production Research: It's Profitable but More Difficult, Penn State News, January 2018.

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<https://extension.psu.edu/backyard-turkey-health>

⁴ Hulet, R.M, P. Clauer, G. Greaser, J. Harper, L. Kime, Small Flock Turkey Production, Penn State University, 2005. <https://extension.psu.edu/small-flock-turkey-production>

⁵ El-Begearmi, M., Amount to Feed Your Flock #2051, UMaine Extension, 1997

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