

## Chickens – Basic Care

- Chickens are generally easy to handle and not as fragile as other bird species, they are usually docile.
- Chickens are social animals but care must be taken to avoid overcrowding.
- They are likely to panic when sudden changes occur in their environment.
- It is recommended that the number of hens per cage should not exceed eight. When group size increases to twelve or more, adult hen hysteria may occur in some stocks.
- The optimal ratio in most breeder flocks is one male to twelve to fifteen females for egg layers and one male to nine to eleven females for broilers.
- Chickens housed in groups develop a “pecking order,” or hierarchy in which the dominant birds will control the movement, feeding, and socialization of the less dominate birds.
- Chickens huddle together for shared warmth or spread out for heat dissipation.
- Minimum cage/pen sizes are specified in The Guide for the Care and Use of Agriculture Animals in Agriculture Research and Teaching, exceptions must be approved by the IACUC.
- Examples of enrichment:
  - Plastic flower pots
  - Dust baths
  - Perches at different levels and diameters
  - Nest boxes
  - Foraging items: fruits, grass, insects, worms, and berries.
- Foraging behavior is an important component of chickens. They will spend 35-50% of the day scratching and pecking for food. If items are not offered for foraging, bad habits such as feather pecking will develop.
- A variety of high quality, commercially prepared, nutritionally complete food should be offered such as meal, pellets, and grain.
- Fresh water should be available ad libitum.
- The avian digestive tract is unique. It contains several organs not found in other lab animals; a crop, a gizzard, and two ceca.
- To restrain a chicken reach over the back with both hands to hold the wings down on the body. Pick up the wings in one hand, and hold them behind the bird. Restrain the legs between the fingers of the other hand.
- Chickens may also be carried upside down safely by the legs, but will remain calmer if placed under one arm and apply gentle pressure on the wing.
- A chicken will usually lie quietly on a table if a cloth is draped over its head.
- For more specific species information including physiologic data, husbandry and breeding requirements, or procedural information, please contact the Office of Laboratory Animal Care (865-974-5634).