



COOP AND CLOVER

Winter Coop Guide

Keep your flock warm, dry, and laying
through the coldest months.

A free guide from Coop and Clover | Backyard chicken gear, tested in a working flock

START HERE

The Big Picture

Chickens are tougher in winter than most new keepers expect. A healthy adult bird in a dry, draft-free coop can handle temperatures well below freezing. What actually causes trouble is **moisture, wind, frozen water, and too little daylight**, not the cold itself.

Everything in this guide comes back to five priorities:

Priority	What it means
1. Ventilate	Let moist air out so frostbite and respiratory problems don't take hold.
2. Stay dry	Dry bedding, a leak-free roof, and no wet floors.
3. Block drafts	Stop wind at bird level while keeping vents open higher up.
4. Water and feed	Unfrozen water all day and enough calories to stay warm.
5. Check daily	A quick look at combs, feet, and behavior catches problems early.

The most common winter mistake

Sealing the coop up tight to "keep the warmth in." Chickens breathe out a lot of moisture, and so do their droppings. In a closed coop that moisture condenses and freezes, and wet air is what gives birds frostbite. A cold, dry, ventilated coop beats a warm, damp, stuffy one every time.

Know your flock

Cold-hardy breeds with small combs and heavy feathering, such as Orpingtons, Wyandottes, Plymouth Rocks, Australorps, and Brahmas, do best. Large-combed breeds (Leghorns, Minorcas) and very young, old, or sick birds need extra attention. Chicks and young pullets under about 16 to 20 weeks may not be fully feathered and need extra care going into the first cold snap.

COOP SETUP

Ventilation, Bedding, and Drafts

Ventilation

Fresh air exchange is the single biggest factor in winter flock health.

- Aim for roughly **1 square foot of open vent area per bird**, with the openings placed **above roost height** so air moves over the birds' heads, not across them.
- Soffit vents, gable vents, and covered openings under the roofline work well. Cover vents with hardware cloth to keep predators out.
- Keep vents open in all weather. If you see frost or condensation on the walls or ceiling, you need more airflow, not less.
- Block **drafts**, which are wind blowing directly on roosting birds. Seal gaps near the roost and at floor level, and leave the upper vents alone.

The deep litter method

Deep litter turns your coop floor into a slow compost pile that gives off a little natural warmth and keeps things drier.

- In fall, start with 4 inches of pine shavings, chopped straw, or a mix, and build to **8 to 12 inches** over winter.
- Every few days, stir it with a rake or let the chickens scratch through it. Add fresh bedding on top as needed.
- Remove any wet or caked spots right away, especially under waterers.
- Clean the whole coop out in spring. The finished litter is great garden compost once it has aged.

Skip the cedar and the damp hay

Avoid cedar shavings, which have strong aromatic oils, and avoid damp or moldy hay or straw. Mold spores cause respiratory illness in birds.

Roosts built for cold feet

Use a **2x4 laid flat side up** (or a roost 2 to 4 inches wide) rather than a thin round dowel. Chickens settle down over their feet at night, and a wide roost lets them cover their toes with their feathers, which helps prevent frostbitten feet. Allow about 8 to 12 inches of roost per bird, and keep the roost away from outside walls.

HEAT, WATER, AND FOOD

Staying Warm and Hydrated

Do you need to heat the coop?

For most flocks, **no**. Chickens generate their own heat, huddle together on the roost, and grow extra feathers as the days shorten. Heating can actually backfire: birds that get used to a warm coop are at greater risk when the power goes out, and a big temperature swing between coop and outdoors is hard on them.

Fire safety comes first

Heat lamps are one of the leading causes of coop fires. Bulbs fall, dust and bedding ignite, and cords fail. If you decide to heat for an extreme cold spell or a vulnerable bird, choose a **flat radiant panel heater designed for coops**, mount it securely out of reach, use a heavy-duty outdoor-rated cord, and keep the bedding and dust cleared away from it. Never hang anything by its cord.

Water: the daily winter battle

A hen can go without food for a while, but not without water. Frozen water means fewer eggs and quick dehydration.

- Use a **heated waterer or a heated base** under a metal or plastic fount. Check the cord and thermostat before each season.
- Flexible rubber pans pop ice out easily if you have no power at the coop. Swap in fresh water at least twice a day.
- Keep water **outside the sleeping area** where possible to cut down on spills and humidity, and set it up on a block so it stays free of bedding.
- Never add salt, sugar, or anything else to the water to prevent freezing.

Feed for winter

- Offer a complete **layer feed** (16 to 18 percent protein) free choice. Birds eat more when it's cold, so keep feeders full.
- A small scoop of scratch grains or cracked corn in the late afternoon gives them fuel to burn overnight. Keep treats and scratch to about 10 percent of the diet so they don't crowd out complete feed.
- Add a handful of chopped greens, a hanging cabbage, or a flock block to give them something to peck at when they're stuck inside.
- Provide **grit**, and oyster shell on the side for layers, even if the ground is snow-covered.

HEALTH WATCH

Frostbite and Winter Health

Frostbite

Combs, wattles, and toes are the first places frostbite shows up, especially in humid air and on roosters with large combs.

What you see	What to do
Pale, white, or gray patches on comb, wattles, or toes	Move the bird to a dry, slightly warmer spot (like a garage) gradually . Don't rub the area.
Skin turns red, swollen, then dark or black	Keep it clean and dry. Damaged tissue often falls off by itself. Call a vet if the bird seems unwell or there is infection.
Bird is lethargic, huddled, or limping	Check feet, offer warm (not hot) water, and contact a poultry vet.

Prevention: keep the coop dry and ventilated, use wide roosts, and keep waterers from spilling onto the bedding. Some keepers rub a thin layer of petroleum jelly on combs and wattles on very cold nights. It's optional, it's not a cure, and it only helps on dry skin, so don't use it as a substitute for good ventilation.

Fewer eggs in winter

Hens need roughly 14 to 16 hours of daylight to lay steadily. As days shorten, production drops or stops, and many hens molt in fall. That's normal.

- You can add supplemental light on a timer, ideally in the **early morning** and with a low-wattage LED bulb. Don't use a light on all night.
- Many keepers let their hens rest. A winter break is natural, and some say it supports healthy laying later in life.
- **Collect eggs at least twice a day.** They freeze and crack quickly in hard cold.

Know the warning signs

Sign	Possible cause
Sneezing, nasal discharge, rattling breath	Respiratory illness, often from damp or poorly ventilated coops
Pecking and feather loss	Boredom or crowding when birds are stuck inside
Drop in water intake	Frozen or dirty water
Mites or lice on birds	Winter is peak season. Check under the wings and around the vent

THE RUN AND THE ROUTINE

Winter Run Setup and Daily Care

Many chickens refuse to walk on snow. Giving them a protected, ground-level space outside the coop keeps them active, cuts down on boredom, and takes pressure off the coop's air quality.

Winterizing the run

- Cover the **top and the windward sides** of part of the run with clear greenhouse film, plywood, or a tarp. Leave gaps at the top for airflow.
- Spread **straw, wood chips, or leaves** over the ground to give them something to stand on. Shovel a path to the coop door.
- Offer a dust bath in a protected corner, using dry dirt and wood ash.
- Give them something to do: a hanging cabbage, a few perches or stumps, or a flock block.

Predators in winter

Foxes, raccoons, hawks, and other predators get hungrier when food is scarce. Check the latches, hardware cloth, and fence line before the season, and shut the coop door every night at dusk. Snow drifts can also give climbing animals a new way over the fence.

A 5-minute daily routine

Morning	Open the pop door. Swap or thaw the water. Collect eggs. Look the birds over.
Midday	Top up feed. Collect eggs again. Spot-clean any wet bedding.
Late afternoon	Give a small scoop of scratch. Check the water one last time.
Dusk	Count heads. Close and lock the coop door. Make sure vents are open.

Weekly

Stir the deep litter, wipe down the waterer, check cords and heaters, look for mites, and inspect the coop for leaks and loose latches.

YOUR CHECKLIST

Winter Prep Checklist

Print this page and work through it before the first hard freeze.

Coop

- ☐ Fix roof leaks and check for gaps around doors and windows
- ☐ Open and screen vents above roost height
- ☐ Seal drafts at the roost level and the floor
- ☐ Start a deep litter base of 4 inches or more
- ☐ Replace thin roosts with wide, flat ones

Water and feed

- ☐ Test and set up heated waterer or heated base
- ☐ Buy a rubber backup pan for power outages
- ☐ Stock layer feed, scratch, grit, and oyster shell
- ☐ Pick a dry spot to store feed away from rodents

Run and safety

- ☐ Cover part of the run top and windward side
- ☐ Spread straw or wood chips on the ground
- ☐ Check predator-proofing: latches, hardware cloth, fence line
- ☐ Inspect all cords and heater mounts, or remove heat lamps

Flock

- ☐ Check every bird for mites, lice, and body condition
- ☐ Treat or isolate any sick or underweight birds
- ☐ Decide on supplemental light: yes, no, or a timer
- ☐ Keep a poultry vet's number in your phone

Disclaimer: This guide offers general backyard chicken care information and is not a substitute for veterinary advice. Climate, coop design, and flock needs vary. If a bird seems seriously ill or injured, contact a poultry or avian vet.