

Chick Days are Coming!

HUNTER NICKELL – LIVESTOCK PRODUCTION AGENT

Each spring, a familiar sign goes up at local feed stores: “Chick Days Are Here.” For many families across the Southwind District, Chick Days mark the true beginning of spring. The sound of peeping chicks, the smell of fresh pine shavings, and the excitement of starting a new flock signal longer days and warmer weather ahead.

Whether you’re adding to an existing laying flock or starting backyard chickens for the first time, Chick Days at your local feed store are a great opportunity to get started. Before bringing those fluffy chicks home, though, it’s important to have the proper setup ready.

Baby chicks cannot regulate their body temperature for the first few weeks of life, so a brooder is essential. A brooder can be as simple as a large plastic tote, a stock tank, or a sturdy cardboard box, placed in a draft-free area such as a garage or outbuilding.

Line the bottom with absorbent bedding, such as pine shavings (avoid cedar shavings, which can cause respiratory irritation). Plan for about half a square foot per chick at first, increasing space as they grow.

You’ll also need a heat source. A heat lamp with a red bulb or a radiant heat plate designed for chicks works well. Start the temperature at 95 degrees Fahrenheit during the first week, then reduce by about 5 degrees each week until the chicks are fully feathered. Always secure heat lamps carefully to reduce fire risk, and check them daily. If not secured or checked, they can cause a massive fire and cause loss of animals and structures.

All baby chicks need food and fresh water! Provide a chick starter feed that contains 18–20% protein. Medicated and non-medicated options are available; the medicated starter helps prevent coccidiosis, a common intestinal disease in young poultry. Clean, fresh water should be available at all times in a shallow chick waterer to prevent drowning. Placing marbles or small stones in the waterer during the first few days can help reduce accidents. Keep feeders and waterers clean and positioned so bedding does not constantly contaminate them.

A few additional items will make management easier:

- A thermometer to monitor brooder temperature
- Electrolyte or vitamin supplements for water during times of stress
- A small scoop or sifter for cleaning out wet bedding
- A plan for long-term housing once birds outgrow the brooder

Before purchasing chicks, check local ordinances to ensure backyard poultry are allowed in your area and determine how many birds you can reasonably manage. Also consider predator protection, coop ventilation, and future feed costs.

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Impulse buying can be tempting when faced with bins of fluffy chicks, but planning ahead is key. Research breeds that match your goals. Some breeds are known for high egg production, while others are better suited for meat production or dual-purpose use. Think about temperament, climate adaptability, and egg color preferences as well.

Raising backyard poultry can be a rewarding experience for families, youth projects, and small-acreage producers alike. With a little preparation and proper care, those tiny chicks will quickly grow into productive laying hens or meat birds for your household.

As you stop by your local feed store this spring, take time to prepare before bringing chicks home. A well-prepared brooder and a solid management plan will set your flock up for a healthy start — and make Chick Days an enjoyable beginning to the season. Should you have questions regarding nutrition, housing, predator control, or biosecurity practices, feel free to reach out to Hunter Nickell, Livestock Production Agent at any Southwind Extension District Office or by email at nickell99@ksu.edu.