BACKYARD FLOCK TIP...

DON'T START OUT WITH A FLAT TIRE

Poultry Extension Specialists generally recommend use of a high quality manufactured feed for the backyard flock. While this advice is usually followed, it sometimes comes to our attention that flock owners try to reduce feed costs by blending this feed with ground grain, scratch feed, or other low cost materials. If we are trying to simply maintain adult birds, this procedure might work. However, if we expect reasonable body weight gain, as in the case of broilers, or respectable egg production from layers, such mixtures will probably not provide the bird with adequate nutrients.

What must be absolutely avoided is the temptation to feed these low cost mixtures to starting chicks. The reason is quite clear if we consider the growth rate of the young bird. Those with children will recall that it takes a human baby about 3½ months to double its birth weight. By contrast, a newly hatched broiler chick more than triples its hatch weight during the first week of life. Common backyard breeds grow more slowly, but still at a remarkably rapid rate. The implications for feed quality are clear. Due to its extremely rapid growth, the young chick needs high levels of all those nutrients required for bone and muscle development. If we feed chicks a diet with, for example, adequate protein but deficient levels of calcium and phosphorus, a weak skeleton will result. If the deficiency is severe enough, the bird may be subject to chronic skeletal problems during its entire life.

All are aware of the extreme importance of vitamins to young animals. Vitamin manufacturers make vitamin capsules in the shape of cartoon characters and add pleasant flavorings to encourage proper vitamin nutrition of children. In the case of starting chicks, if we try to save money by blending low cost ingredients with a standard feed, one effect is to dilute the vitamins to the point where actual deficiencies can occur.

The immediate effects of nutrient deficiencies are not always apparent. It is generally known that
animals, including humans, are more prone to disease if they are malnourished. Young chicks with few body reserves may be especially prone to illness if they are fed a diet deficient in key nutrients.

It is strongly recommended that during the first few weeks of life special care be given to provide chicks with a high quality starter feed. The consumption per chick is very low so any extra expense for a good feed is minimal. The chick can not be expected to have a long and productive life if it starts out with a nutritional handicap. Feed a diet that has been specially formulated for growing chicks. Usually such a diet will be labeled as a "chick starter ration or feed." This starter diet will contain adequate protein, vitamins and other nutrients to get your chicks off on the right foot nutritionally.

For best results, it is always advisable to provide feed made specifically for the stage of production of your birds. For example, feed a "laying mash" only to birds that are laying eggs. Feed a "grower or developer feed" to adolescent, growing birds. Look for the word "complete" on the feed label. This indicates the feed contains all of the nutrients, minerals, vitamins, etc. necessary to keep your flock health and productive.

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**Consult with your poultry company representative before making management changes.**

“Your local County Extension Agent is a source of more information on this subject.”