

Hen Rehomers – FAQs

Before you commit to rehoming hens, you need to give yourself time to decide whether you really have the time, space and resources to keep them. They are not hard to keep, and don't need a great deal, but what they do need, they need absolutely.

This page contains answers to many of the most commonly asked questions about keeping ex-battery hens and links to places where you can read stories from current rehomers and get help and advice from other poultry keepers.

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1. Are hens hard to look after?

They are no harder to look after than rabbits - they need food and water every day, shelter, cleaning out and a bit of stimulation. They need a safe fox-proof place to sleep at night (they quickly learn to put themselves to bed as it gets dark) and an outdoor area where they can scratch about - a minimum of 8 square feet per hen (ie almost a square yard), though more is always welcome. They may initially be very alarmed by their new world and its inhabitants, but they are typically very open to human attention, easy to handle, and very interested in everything you do.

2. How many hens should I have?

Chickens are flock birds. 1 chicken on her own will be very miserable, 2 is the bare minimum, 3 is better, because if you lose one, as does sometimes happen, then at least you then still have two. (If you ever get down to 1 hen, please contact us, as we may be able to supply a companion through our contacts.) You need to have enough space for your hens – you should allow at least 8 square feet of space per hen outside, and at least a foot of perching space inside for each hen, as a minimum.

3. What sort of house and run do I need?

Hens need a warm, dry secure place to sleep. This can take the form of a purpose built hen house, ark or a converted shed or wendy house. Perches should be provided to allow the hens somewhere to roost during the night. Hen houses should also have nest boxes, to allow the hens a quiet space in which to lay their eggs. Do not be alarmed if, initially (or always...), your hens lay eggs in other places – previously they would have just deposited their eggs on the floor of a battery cage. For the first few days it can help to leave an egg (even a rubber egg) in one of the nest boxes to give them the idea. Two nest boxes is plenty for 6-8 hens; they are likely to choose one nest box and all lay in the same one!

It's a good idea to have a layer of wood shavings or clean straw on the floor of the hen house – this makes cleaning their droppings up a bit easier. Nest boxes should have wood shavings or clean straw in them.

Hens also need a secure, safe place to spend their daylight hours – a purpose build run would be ideal, but if you do decide to let them have the run of your garden you will need to bear in mind that they can be quite ruthless when it comes to digging holes in gardens, eating your beloved plants and scratching up your lawn. Make sure your coop/housing is of adequate size, draught proofed for winter (with air vents near the top). If you buy a commercially produced coop, do not stock it with more hens than recommended - commercial coop suppliers always "talk up" the number of hens their coops will hold, so their recommendations should be seen as absolute maximums. If building your own run, allow at least 8 square feet per bird in the outdoor area, more if possible. The more space they have the happier they will be. In a too small run they will become bored and miserable, and will then start to peck each other. The coop should allow one foot of perching space for each bird, plus one nest box for every four birds.

Be prepared to clean your coop very regularly (at least weekly) to keep your chickens clear from parasites and some illnesses. If they are in a run, you need to move the run regularly or cover the bottom with several inches of wood chips, which will need to be changed every few weeks or whenever they get smelly (they will make an excellent supplement to your compost heap). You will need to care for your chickens as you do other pets, regularly checking them for any parasites or other health problems and you may incur vet bills if they fall ill.

4. What happens when I go on holiday?

You will need to make sure they are cared for properly if you are away. It will have to be a very good friend who is willing to get up early to let them out of their coop for you, feed and water them, and secure them before dark! (An expensive but nifty assistance here, and also for people who work all day, is an automatic door opener and closer, which opens the henhouse door at a fixed time and closes when it gets dark. These cost around £100. Providing your hens have learnt to put themselves to bed - which sometimes takes a while with ex-batts - this means you will only need to get someone to come in once a day to feed and water them.)

5. What do I do when I get my hens home for the first time?

It's advisable when you first get your hens to put them into their hen house (with food and water) and allow them to adapt overnight to their new surroundings. They will soon get into a routine of coming out of their hen house for the day and returning to the house when it is getting to dusk. They have never previously had an indoor and an outdoor space, however, so it may take a few weeks before they learn to put themselves to bed as it gets dark – always check at dusk to make sure they are all in the coop.

They will soon sort out their pecking order, so to speak. This will range from the most dominant hen right down to the little hen who runs out of everyone else's way. They may take a few days to sort this out, and in the mean time you may have a few squabbles and a bit of fighting as various hens jostle for position. Just keep an eye on them to make sure that none of them gets injured in the squabbling. It can be a difficult day or two, but they almost always sort this out without human intervention.

Finally – congratulations. You should be proud of the fact that you have helped save the lives of these hens by providing them with food, shelter and love. They will provide you with hours of pleasure and a supply of eggs – enjoy!!

6. Will my hens be bald?

Battery hens vary greatly. Some are large healthy birds when they come out of the battery and others are pitifully skinny and may be a bit bald – or even so bald that they look “oven ready”! All hens lose some feathers during an annual moulting cycle, and the farmer tends to get rid of hens during this period as they stop laying then. Battery hens may also lose feathers due to poor diet (especially the ones at the bottom of the pecking order) or to feather pecking by other inmates of the cages, which is a response to boredom, hunger and stress.

If your hens are skinny and bald, they may look quite shocking, but don't worry. In a secure home, with lots of good food, they will soon feather up and turn into the beautiful hens they are.

Care should be however taken of bald hens in extreme weather conditions – too much sun and they can develop sunburn; on the other hand they may need to be kept inside during cold weather and in extremely cold weather it may be advisable to keep them in a shed rather than putting them outside.

To speed up the growth of feathers, it helps to feed them a high protein diet. You can replace layers mash with chick crumb or growers pellets, both of which contain more protein than layers mash. You can also supplement their diet with any high protein food, including scraps of meat, fish or cheese, small amounts of catfood, or cooked beans. (If you are selling their eggs, DEFRA regulations state that you must not feed them any meat product or scraps, though in a domestic setting it is safe to feed them anything you would eat yourself or feed to other pets).

7. Will my hens be healthy?

On Rehoming Day your hens will have been given a quick 'once over' to determine if they have any major health issues, which may cause concern and long claws will also have been trimmed if necessary to make walking easier for the hens. We never knowingly rehome a sick or injured bird, unless, exceptionally, the rehomer is aware of the problem, still wants to take the bird on, and agrees to arrange any necessary veterinary care. If we identify a sick or injured hen, we normally keep it back and care for it until it is fit to rehome. If treatment is not realistic, we arrange for the bird to be put to sleep.

Battery hens will have been vaccinated against common poultry diseases and in most cases will have been routinely treated against mites, worms and other parasites. They may be pretty skinny and bald at first, but on the whole even bald and skinny hens are basically healthy. Some may have sore patches on their skin or minor abrasions and peck marks. These look nasty but will soon heal up once they are out of the battery. Often you may notice beak deformities or beak clipping has taken place. This was done to try and stop them pecking other hens in the cage and some can appear quite drastic but again, don't worry: your hens will still be able to eat and drink as normal.

It's also worth remembering that prior to release battery hens have only had an area slightly larger than this leaflet to walk around in so their level of fitness will be poor. Again, this will improve rapidly.

Most ex-battery hens live several years, but we cannot guarantee this, and sadly some hens do die quite soon after rehoming. If at any time you have several hens die in quick succession, you should always discuss this with a vet, in case this indicates an infectious condition which may affect other birds or may need to be reported to DEFRA. If this occurs within the first few weeks after rehoming, please also let us know.

If you have hens die and are left with a single lone bird, do contact us - a lone hen is likely to be miserable, and we may be able to find you a companion hen through our contacts.

8. Do hens need any regular health treatments?

You will need to check your hen house and hens regularly for any signs of parasites (fleas, lice and mites). Be more vigilant during the summer months. Fleas and lice may be seen on your hens, red mite tends to live in the nooks and crannies of your hen house and will crawl onto the hens during the night and feed (blood) from them. There are a wide range of products designed to treat hens and their surroundings and you can get advice on these from your local pet shop, agricultural store or various online forums (see *Where can I go for more advice and information?*).

Hens should be wormed (at the very least) a couple of times a year with a product like flubenvet or panacur (your vet will be able to advise on these products). Talking of vets, when you get your hens it is worthwhile checking the local vets in the area to ascertain who will treat your new pets. Sooner or later you will come across a hen needing veterinary assistance and it is a good idea to register in advance with a hen-friendly vet!!

9. Will the hens get on with my cats/dogs/children?

Hens can normally hold their own perfectly well with cats. A cat will often go through the motions of stalking hens, but an adult hen can easily see off a cat, and after some initial interest, they normally leave each other alone. (Our only concern would be about "Maine Coone" cats, which have been bred to be larger than other cats and are exceptionally determined hunters. It is possible that cats of this unusual breed could pose a threat to hens.)

We would not recommend introducing hens to free range where any dog is present. It is sometimes possible to integrate hens and dogs, but this depends very much on the dog, and dogs vary greatly in their response to hens. Some can be sweetly protective of the hens, but others, particularly terriers, will kill a hen without a second thought, and many dogs will "play" with a hen in a manner likely to cause distress, injury or death. If there are likely to be dogs around, we would recommend keeping the hens completely secure and separate and introducing the hens to the dog under very close supervision to test the dog's reaction.

Battery hens are generally a quiet breed and make very good pets for children. Once the hens have settled down in their new homes, they quickly become much tamer than other pets and extremely ready to interact with the children. Many hens seem to enjoy being picked up, and even quite young children soon learn how to do this. All hens like being fed titbits, and soon learn who their friends are in this regard, and will run out to greet anyone they see as a likely source of goodies! Hens do tend to peck at anything that they perceive as a potential speck of food - unfortunately this may include the freckles on your children's legs or the polka dots on their socks, so we would always advise having legs and feet covered when dealing with the hens. However, battery hens all have fairly blunt trimmed beaks (this is done from injuring each other in the cramped battery conditions) so they are unlikely to do more than startle your child if they do peck. Naturally, the usual precautions apply and you should teach your children to wash their hands after handling hens.

10. How noisy are hens?

Hens can be noisy, and this is potentially an issue if you have a small garden with neighbours living very close to you. All hens will cluck at intervals and most hens will make a large announcement to the world after they've laid/an egg or if they see a fox or anything else that they see as a threat. However, as hens go, battery hens are generally a quiet breed and less likely to cause noise problems than other hens. They certainly compare favourably to dogs as far as noise goes, but for some reason many people feel that a barking dog is acceptable but a clucking hen is not.

Neighbour problems can arise because hens will always greet the new day rather enthusiastically - so if they have access to the new day at 5 in the morning, your neighbours may well feel aggrieved. We would strongly recommend keeping hens locked up at night for their own safety in any case, and if you keep them in a dark shed or coop until a decent hour in the morning (eight o'clock?) they won't make more than a quiet murmuring until you let them out. If you need to go out to work before this hour, you can purchase an automatic door opener with a timer, which allows the hens to be let out at any time you select, and be shut in again after dark.

11. What should I do about foxes?

Foxes are a threat to hens at all times, whether you live in town or country. (We have even had experience of a fox coming into an urban garden and killing hens whilst the owner was out of sight at the other end of the garden!) You can keep hens free ranging in your garden for a year, and think your high fences or some other feature makes you safe - then one day a fox will prove you wrong. Similarly, you can believe your hens are safe in a pen, while in fact a fox is busily chewing or digging his way in while you are out at work. To avoid this risk, place paving slabs or rubble around the perimeter of the run, and build your run very securely. But if a fox gets to your hens, it will typically kill all of them. (This is not "evil killing for the sake of it" but a sensible survival strategy - killing five while the chance is there is not much harder than killing one, and in a natural setting the fox will then come back and take one of the bodies each day until they are gone).

We leave our rehomers to make their own judgment about whether to free range their hens. Some feel that the quality of life offered by free ranging makes the extra risk worth it. Others find this unacceptable and prefer to keep their hens somewhere more secure. You will find lots of advice on relevant websites about how to reduce the risk of fox attack, but you will never eradicate the risk entirely.

12. How many eggs will they lay?

Although most battery hens do lay quite well, you should not get ex-battery hens if you are primarily interested in their eggs, since laying cannot be guaranteed. The farmer is only disposing of them because they are past their peak for egg laying. They are a year and a half old and will have laid around 300 eggs. At this stage they are likely to go through a period "off lay", and thereafter to lay fewer eggs, which makes them become uneconomic to keep commercially.

Most hens do continue to lay eggs throughout their natural lives, although the number diminishes as they get older, they all lay fewer eggs in winter and most have a period "off lay" each year. However, some may not lay at all after they are released. Either way, ex-battery hens make excellent pets, so treat the eggs as a bonus.

13. Do the hens need a cockerel?

Battery hens are kept in all female units and will never have seen a cockerel. Contrary to popular mythology, hens certainly don't need a cockerel to lay eggs. In the absence of a cockerel, they simply lay infertile eggs - which can never develop into a chick.

If you plan to keep your hens with a cockerel, please introduce them gradually, since initially they are likely to find the cockerel pretty alarming. If you want to breed from your ex-battery hens, you will certainly need a cockerel and will probably need an incubator for the eggs, since the strain of hens used for batteries has largely lost the instinct to "go broody" and therefore are not likely to nurture their eggs.

14. Will the hens mess up my garden?

Unless your garden is vast, it may be sensible to allow your hens to free range in it only as a treat. Three or four hens, left to free range in an average suburban garden for a few months, will reduce it to a barren sea of dust and mud - leaving only the shrubs and a few plants like nettles and spurge, which are bitter to eat. Consider leaving your grass longer than usual to give it a chance, and planting shrubs, tough plants and trees. Don't expect chickens to respect your borders and lawn! However, do let them come out under your supervision - they will love to "help" with gardening - mostly by getting in the way of your spade or trowel, in their pursuit of worms!

On the whole, hens will avoid toxic plants, but there are a few, such as yew and laburnum, which may pose a risk.

15. What do hens eat?

Battery hens are accustomed to eating nothing but dried layers mash and this should initially be the basis of their diet – so you need to find a local pet or agricultural store that sells or can obtain this, BEFORE you get your hens. Farmers use layers mash because it gives them all of the nutrients they need and can be delivered using an automatic system. If you wish, you can gradually change this to layers pellets (over a few weeks), which is the same food in pellet form and so is less messy.

Hens are naturally omnivorous, and will enthusiastically supplement their diet with worms, beetles, woodlice etc. As treats, your hens will also appreciate more varied food if given the chance - including mixed corn, and more or less any cooked human food that comes their way such as bread, pasta, rice, fruit or cooked vegetables. They will enjoy leafy vegetables, raw, and a fresh cabbage hung up in their pen will keep them occupied as well as fed. A handful of grass clippings will also help keep their egg yolks a lovely bright yellow. It is recommended to feed scraps only in the afternoon, as the hens may otherwise not get the balance of nutrients that they would normally receive from their mash or pellets. Only ever put down as much as they will eat that day, as unwanted food left lying around will attract rats and decaying food or grass clippings may lead to illness.

Please note that if you are planning to sell eggs, you must not feed your hens on any scraps, as it is illegal under DEFRA regulations - this is designed to prevent the feeding of potentially contaminated food to any animal in the food chain. However, for domestic purposes, you can feed your hens whatever they like!

Hens should also always have access to poultry or oyster grit (also available from your local agricultural or pet store). This is a mixture of oyster shell and small pieces of grit. This provides additional calcium and the hens will instinctively know if they need this, and will peck it up. Oyster grit also includes small stones, which hens need to eat to help them to grind their up their food, as they have no teeth. When a hen eats, its food initially settles in the “crop”, a chamber in front of the hen’s neck. When the hen has eaten greedily, this may appear as an alarming lump on the hens neck, (sometimes more to one side than the other), bigger than a golf ball, very hard, and particularly conspicuous if the hen is bald. Don’t worry – this is completely normal!

If your hens are poorly feathered or bald when you first get them, they will benefit from extra protein either in the form of "growers meal" from your food supplier, or high protein scraps from your table. A little dairy food is fine, but large amounts may give the hens diarrhoea.

And of course, hens should always have access to a good supply of fresh clean water.

16. <http://northlondonhenrescue.blogspot.com/> **How do ex-battery hens adapt to life outside the cage?**



Battery hens have led barren lives, never seeing the sky or scratching the earth. There is not even space in the battery cage for them to open their wings. In the tiny space allotted to them, no bigger than a sheet of A4 paper, all their natural instincts are suppressed.

Amazingly, however, it is only a matter of hours after their release before they start to discover their true nature and it is wonderful to watch them take their first tentative steps into a new world. Within days they become lively engaging creatures, interested in everything going on and clearly enjoying life.

At the point when we purchase the hens, they are often threadbare and may look quite frail - though only a few are as sorry looking as this poor girl. However, they are basically healthy, and as commercial hens will have received vaccinations against the main diseases of poultry. They are also tougher than they look! After a few weeks, new feathers will start to grow, and they will soon become beautiful lively birds, rewarding you with much affection, entertainment and lots of delicious eggs. Even though they are "spent" from a commercial point of view, they are still young birds and in a kind, domestic setting they can thrive for many years.

17. Who are Hen Rehomers UK?

Hen Rehomers UK began in North London, and has until recently worked under the name North London Hen Rescue - we changed our name in August 2008 to reflect the tremendous support we have had from rehomers all over the country.

All of the work of Hen Rehomers UK is done by volunteers who have day jobs and many other commitments. We volunteer with Hen Rehomers UK because we have ex-battery hens ourselves and know what great pets they can be and we want to help more hens have the opportunity to enjoy life after the battery farm. We have no paid employees, no premises, no sponsorship and no funding apart from the donations of our supporters and what we put in ourselves. We can only continue to rehome these hens if our rehomers work supportively with us to overcome the many obstacles and problems that may arise in the course of this work. If you would like to help us with this work, please contact us through our "Help us" page.

18. How do I go about adopting ex-battery hens from Hen Rehomers UK?

If you rehome hens from us, the process is as follows:

- You complete our Application Form. This does not commit you to take hens from us, but allows us to know that you are interested and helps us to plan the rescue.
- When we have a rescue date, we will contact you with details of where your nearest co-ordinator is and of where and when you would need to collect your hens.
- At this point we will ask you to confirm the number of hens that you want, and to send us a donation of at least £1 per hen towards our costs. (If by any chance some problem prevents us from rehoming the hens to you, we will return the donation to you - this does not apply however if you simply fail to collect hens which you have asked for!)
- You will need to liaise with your local co-ordinator about the collection of your hens, and agree the precise arrangements. (We have co-ordinators at various points around the country, and try to be helpful in getting hens as close to you as possible, sometimes by asking rehomers to help each other with collection and delivery.)
- When we are clear how many hens we can rehome, and how many should be going to each co-ordinator, we collect that number of hens from the farm and deliver them to the co-ordinator, where you must collect them as agreed.

19. Where else could I get rescued hens?

There are a number of organisations who rescue ex-battery hens, one of which may be able to help you when we cannot. These include:

- Free at Last, an excellent independent rescue organisation working in Bedfordshire and surrounding counties
- The Battery Hen Welfare Trust, operates rescues all over the United Kingdom through a network of coordinators, as well as campaigning on battery hen welfare issues.
- Brighton Animal Action has for some years run an annual "Hen Liberation", rehoming several thousand ex-free range chickens from a local farmer
- Farplace Animal Rescue, is based in county Durham, and can also supply hens in Dumfries and Galloway and from Cumbria to Glasgow.
- Little Hen Rescue operates in Norfolk and Suffolk, rehoming ex battery hens and some other poultry.

20. Where can I go for more advice and information?

We are always happy to help rehomers with advice, particularly if they are new to hen keeping. This FAQ may contain all the answers you need and we also publish a short guide called Advice for the Novice Poultry Keeper” which gives basic information about keeping hens for the first time – your local Hen Rehomers Co-ordinator will have copies of this guide available at each rehoming day or you can ask for one in advance, either from your local Co-ordinator or from publicity@henrehomers.net. You can also read some stories from our previous rehomers on our blog at <http://northlondonhenrescue.blogspot.com/>.

If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact your local Hen Rehomers Co-ordinator or you can also find a wealth of information on various internet forums, run by experienced and enthusiastic hen keepers, which you can browse even without becoming a member. If you register as a member, you will find that you are welcomed by friendly people who will be very happy to answer any questions that you have, however big or small. We would particularly recommend the following:

- <http://www.createforum.com/exbatteryhens/>
- <http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/ex-battery-hens/>
- <http://www.downthelane.net/forum/>
- <http://www.growfruitandveg.co.uk/grapevine/rule-roost/>

There is also excellent information about ex-battery hens on the web pages of the Battery Hen Welfare Trust, the organisation that first brought the plight of battery hens to public attention and now both rehomes battery hens and campaigns for their welfare.