

INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT CHICKENS—THE SPECIES



Perhaps a simplistic review of what a chicken is could be helpful in understanding some of the "hows" and "whys" in poultry incubation, production, management, and health.

A chicken is a bird. One of the features that differentiate it from most other birds is that it has a comb and two wattles. The comb is the red appendage on the top of the head, and the wattles are the two appendages under the chin. These are secondary sexual characteristics and are more prominent in the male. A few other birds have a comb or similar appendage, in some cases bearing a different name such as helmet in the guinea, and a few have wattles with some having a single median one rather than a pair. The comb is the basis of the Latin name or classification of chickens. In Latin, gallus means comb, and the domestic chicken is *Gallus domesticus*. The Red Jungle Fowl, ancestor of most domestic chickens, is *Gallus bankiva*. There are eight recognized kinds of combs: single, rose, pea, cushion, buttercup, strawberry, V-shaped, and walnut.

The chicken has two legs and two wings, a fact that influences housing and management. Domestic chickens have essentially lost the ability to fly. Heavy breeds used for meat production cannot do more than flap their wings and jump to a little higher level or move more rapidly along the ground. The lighter-bodied birds can fly short distances, and some can fly over relatively high fences. The feet and shank portions of the legs have scales.

Respiration rate is higher in chickens than in larger animals. In general, it can be said that the smaller the kind of bird the faster it breathes. For example, a hummingbird breathes more times a minute than a chicken. The male chicken breathes about 18 to 21 times a minute and the female about 31 to 37 times when they are not under stress.

The heartbeat of chickens is rather fast, being about 286 times a minute in males and 312 in females in a resting condition.

Digestion rate is somewhat rapid in chickens. It varies from 2 1/2 to 25 hours for passage of food depending on whether the digestion tract is full, partially full, or empty when feed is ingested.

The chicken's temperature is about 107 degrees to 107.5 degrees F.

Chickens are hatched, not born in the truest sense of the word.

Chickens are covered with feathers but have a few vestigial hairs scattered over the body. The average consumer does not see these hairs, because they are singed off in the processing plant.

The chicken has a beak (or bill) and does not have teeth. Any mastication occurs in the gizzard. Many commercial poultry producers do not provide grit to their chickens, because they feed a ground feed of fine meal consistency that can be digested by the bird's digestive juices.

The chicken has pneumatic bones, making its body lighter for flying, if it had not lost the ability to do so.

There are 13 air sacs in the chicken's body, again to make the body lighter, and they are a functioning part of the respiratory system.

Chickens have comparatively short life spans. Some live to be 10 to 15 years old, but they are the exception, not the rule.