

Baby Turkey 101

Congratulations! You have just begun your exciting adventure in raising turkey poults! Turkeys are a wonderful addition to any farmstead. But like anything worth doing, they come with their own set of challenges. First of all, turkey poults are nothing like baby chickens. Where chicks are seemingly equipped from birth to know some things, like eating and drinking simply from instinct, turkeys have to be shown and taught even the basics. A turkey hen teaches her chicks how to eat and drink, and therefore, if you are raising incubated turkey poults, then you must take on the role of “mother hen”.

The first thing we do here at Smokey Mountain Turkey Farms is show the newly hatched poults how to eat and drink. We do this by literally dipping their beaks into the water (gently) for a few times until they realize what it is. Most young poults will die of dehydration within a few days, if they do not learn how to drink for themselves.

The next thing we do is to place a shiny object (marble etc) in their feed dish and their water dispenser so they will peck at it out of curiosity. This causes the poult to learn eating and drinking very quickly. Remember, they start off this process knowing absolutely nothing about taking care of themselves. Now below we will list some of the other important things you need to know when raising young poults.

Heat: Turkey poults have no way of regulating their own body temperature, and they are extremely susceptible to being chilled. In the wild, the mother hen will call to her chicks and have them gather underneath her to use her body heat. If you wish to raise baby turkeys, you must provide them with an acceptable heat source. We use red colored heat lamps. For the first two weeks, the poults need a temperature of around 95 degrees. After this, you can slowly raise the lamp a bit higher each week to lower the temp approximately five degrees at a time and continue the process until the poults are fully feathered and no longer need heat (approximately, 6-8 weeks old). The baby’s will let you know when they are too hot or too cold, either by huddling or trying to get as far away from the heat lamp as they can.

Feed: Unlike baby chickens, turkey poults grow a whole lot in a short amount of time. So as a result, they need a much higher protein feed in order to survive. We recommend 28-30% Game Bird Crumbles for starter poults for the first 8 weeks. After this, you can switch to a 20-22% crumble for another few months until turkeys begin to mature. After that, a 16% crumble or pelleted feed will suffice. However, we do recommend returning to a 20% feed during peak breeding time, if you intend to have hatching eggs from your mature hens.

Water: Turkeys need fresh clean water and lots of it. Also, since they are so susceptible to being chilled, I strongly recommend giving them WARM water for at least the first few weeks. I cannot tell you how many stories we have heard of folks giving their newly hatched poults cold water and finding them dead the next morning.

Bedding: As we have previously discussed, turkeys aren’t the smartest creatures on earth, therefore, we have to do all that we can to keep them from doing stupid things! For instance, if you use a bedding that is too small, such as tiny wood shavings or paper pellets, they will ingest what they can get in their beaks. This will cause them to have a blockage, and they will die very quickly. I recommend a bed of large, pine, kennel shavings like you would use for a dog kennel. These large shavings are affordable and are far too large for the babies to eat. It is also important to keep these shavings clean and dry in order to prevent coccidia. So change the bedding as often as possible.

I am sure there are many more things I could list here, but these are the basics of poult farming. Good luck and enjoy!