



Is it safe to keep chickens in school?

We often speak to staff at schools or community centres who are intrigued by the idea of keeping chickens but worried that they might pose a health risk. Is it safe to keep hens?

We believe that chicken-keeping is extremely safe as long as a few simple precautions are followed. Here's the low-down...

Can we catch diseases from our hens?

Chickens, like all animals, carry around their fair share of bacteria, viruses and parasites. The two zoonoses (diseases that can be transmitted between humans and animals) to be aware of with regard to school chickens are E.coli and salmonella.

E.coli lives in the human gut and most strains are harmless but some can cause serious illness. It can be picked up from contaminated foods and animal faeces. Cases of E.coli O157, the main strain causing serious illness, are very rare; in England and Wales there are about 800 cases a year. Most of these are in hospital and are contracted by elderly patients.

Salmonella is carried by poultry, wild birds and many animals but infection is more commonly caused by eating contaminated, undercooked food. The reported rate of salmonella infection in the general population of Wales was 15 cases per 100,000 people in 2011. Like E.coli, salmonella can be very mild or very serious.

Every year, across the whole of the UK, there are around three outbreaks of gastrointestinal disease which are linked to visits to petting farms. The risk of catching either of these diseases from school chickens is extremely low as long as good hygiene procedures are followed.

How can we reduce the risk of infection from school chickens?

Careful planning and developing good hygiene habits will keep the risk of infection to a minimum.

- Everyone touching the chickens, entering their pen or handling any tools or equipment associated with the chickens **must wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water**. The Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens produce a [Clean Hands Toolkit](#) to download which can be useful for marking out 'clean hands zones'.
- **Antibacterial hand gel is not an adequate substitute for hand-washing**. Hand gel is not effective in killing E.coli and can give a false sense of having clean hands. Helping pupils develop good habits around handwashing, and keeping dirty hands away from their faces will protect them better than providing hand gel.
- If your chickens free range, assume the area is contaminated. **Remember that both staff and children entering chicken areas will pick up faeces on their shoes,**

potentially transferring it to indoor areas including classroom carpets. Consider buying a [simple disinfectant mat](#).

- Do not allow children to kiss the chickens. It's totally adorable but not a good idea!
- Children should never be allowed to eat in the same area as the hens, or allowed to share snacks with them - it can be tempting when the chickens are tucking in to carrot sticks and grapes!

What about dust?

A dusty hen house is unhealthy for your hens as well as humans so choose bedding that doesn't create a lot of dust such as wood or hemp chippings. Chickens should never be given hay (they guzzle it and it can impact their crop) and they only need a little straw for their nest boxes. Provide dust masks for anyone involved in applying diatomaceous earth or cleaning out a really dusty house.

What about pecks and scratches?

Some breeds of chicken are more suitable for schools than others; chat to us about choosing a friendly, docile breed that can be handled without too much wriggling and scratching. Very few hens will peck to be aggressive and it's rare for them to break the skin. Accidental pecks are more common, usually when you're holding something a hen wants or if she mistakes your shiny jewellery (or even your freckles!) for food. Most children are mildly shocked by the first peck they receive and from then on find the process of being pecked very entertaining. Don't allow children to hold chickens up to their faces or anywhere near their eyes. Keep toenails trimmed (we can help you with this if you're struggling). If you do have a hen who is persistently aggressive towards people then you may need to consider re-homing her.

What about chemicals and medications?

Most basic chicken house disinfectants are mild and safe for children to use under supervision, although with some products they may need to wear gloves. However, there may be occasions (for example following a mite infestation or outbreak of chicken sniffles) when you need to use something stronger. All disinfectant products, medications and other products should be stored securely when not in use and covered under your school's COSHH policy.

Where can I find more information?

- [HSE guidance on E.coli](#)
- [Preventing or controlling ill health from animal contact at visitor attractions - Industry Code of Practice](#). Although the code of practice is aimed at open farms it has lots of useful guidance on designing animal enclosures, hand washing areas and signage.
- [NUT Guidance on Animals in Education](#)
- [Talk to us](#) - We can visit your school to help you plan or improve your chicken coop, produce a risk assessment and give practical advice on health, safety and all aspects of chicken care.