

Feeding Ducks Intended for Consumption

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In commercial operations, the three breeds or crosses of ducks most commonly raised for meat production include the white Pekin (*Anas platyrhynchos*), Muscovy (*Cairina moschata*), and hybrid, or mule, ducks, which are a cross of the first two breeds. Because of different growth rates, the nutritional requirements for the three duck types differ somewhat. Pekin ducklings are typically marketed at 6 to 7 lb., obtained at seven to nine weeks of age, having consumed 20 to 25 lb. of feed. Mule and Muscovy ducks take somewhat longer to reach the same weight and require more feed. Although Muscovy ducks take longer to reach market weight, they do not have as much fat as the Pekin breed.

If allowed to forage for green plants, insects, snails, slugs, and so on, most ducks can obtain their minimal nutritional requirements. With forage alone, however, production, whether for meat or eggs, will be low. Owners of small flocks who want to achieve a higher level of production must provide birds with a supplemental feed. As the flock size increases, the ability of the flock to forage in a given area decreases, increasing the need for supplemental feed.

Regardless of how feed is provided, whatever ducks consume must meet all of their nutritional requirements for maintenance and growth. Ducks require the same nutrients as chickens, but in different proportions. The levels of the different nutrients in relation to the energy content of the diet is also important. As with chickens, ducks primarily eat to meet their energy requirements, so the energy level in the diet will dictate how much feed the ducks will eat. They must be able to meet their nutritional requirements within the quantity of feed consumed.

Nutrient Requirements

Compared to chickens, very little research has been done on the nutritional requirements of ducks, especially comparing the different breed options available. Some early research indicates that ducklings have a higher protein requirement for the first two weeks of life (20% of the diet should be protein) but the requirement decreases rapidly after this age. Research has shown that there is no benefit in feeding a diet composed of more than 16% protein (in a well-balanced feed) after two weeks of age.

For a newly hatched duckling, a duck or waterfowl starter or grower feed is required. In most feed stores, these feeds contain 18% to 20% protein. Although duck-specific diets are best, if your local feed store does not sell duck feed, you do have some options. A chick starter or grower diet is formulated to meet the needs of egg-type chicks, which have a lower niacin requirement than ducks. If you use a chick starter or grower diet, you need to add supplemental niacin to the ducks' water. A broiler starter or grower feed is formulated for the needs of the fast-growing cross-breed of Cornish and White Rock, which has a niacin requirement similar to that of ducks. The protein content,

however, may be higher than ducks require in the later stages of growth. Turkey or game bird starter or grower diets contain sufficient niacin for ducks, but the much-higher protein content can be detrimental to the health of ducklings.

Feeding Methods

In the 1930s ducks were typically given a wet mash at different times throughout the day. Today feed is typically given as pellets. Pelleting reduces the labor required in feeding ducks, increases growth performance, and reduces feed waste.

For More Information

[Feeding ducks](#). Peter Ferket and Gary S. Davis, North Carolina State University.