POULTRY NUTRITION

Broiler starter, grower and finisher feed explained

What changes between broiler starter, grower and finisher feeds, when to switch, and why each phase matters for growth and feed conversion.

By FeedSport Nutrition Team · Published 6 October 2026 · Updated 10 October 2026 · 3 min read

KEY POINTS

- Broiler feeding programmes usually use three phases: starter, grower and finisher.
- Protein, amino acid, calcium and phosphorus levels fall from one phase to the next, while energy stays similar or rises.
- The starter phase has the biggest effect on final performance. Do not cut it short.
- Methionine is typically the first limiting amino acid in broiler diets, with lysine close behind.

Modern broilers grow extremely fast. Their nutrient needs change week by week, so feeding programmes are split into phases. Each feed is matched to the bird's stage, which keeps growth on track without paying for nutrients the bird no longer needs.

The three phases

Phase	Typical age	Feed form	Main goal
Starter	about 0–10 days	Crumble or mini-pellet	Early growth, gut and immune development
Grower	about 11–24 days	Pellet	Rapid lean growth
Finisher	about 25 days to slaughter	Pellet	Efficient gain at lowest cost

Exact switch-over ages depend on the genetic line and target slaughter weight. Follow the feeding guide from your chick supplier.

What changes between phases

As broilers grow, their requirement for protein relative to energy falls. Roughly:

	Starter	Grower	Finisher
Crude protein	about 22–23%	about 20–21%	about 18–19%
Energy (AMEn)	about 2,950–3,050 kcal/kg	about 3,050–3,150 kcal/kg	about 3,100–3,200 kcal/kg
Calcium	about 0.9–1.0%	about 0.8–0.9%	about 0.75–0.85%
Available phosphorus	about 0.45–0.50%	about 0.40–0.45%	about 0.35–0.42%

These are indicative ranges. Breed-specific guides give exact digestible amino acid targets.

Amino acids matter more than crude protein

Broilers need specific amino acids in balance. In typical cereal and soybean meal diets:

- **Methionine** is usually the first limiting amino acid. Crystalline methionine is added to almost all broiler feeds.
- **Lysine** is close behind and drives breast meat yield. L-lysine HCl is often added.
- **Threonine** may be third limiting in lower-protein diets.

Formulating on digestible amino acids, not crude protein alone, gives more consistent growth and often lower cost.

The starter phase: do not cut corners

Starter feed is the most expensive per kilogram but the smallest share of total feed. It sets up the gut, immune system and skeleton for the rest of the bird's life. Poor starter nutrition shows up later as uneven flocks, leg problems and poorer feed conversion, even if grower and finisher feeds are good.

- Keep feed and water easy to reach from day one.
- Feed starter for the full recommended period or quantity.
- Use crumbles or mini-pellets that chicks can pick up easily.

Minerals and premix

Calcium and phosphorus build the skeleton that carries a fast-growing bird. Dicalcium phosphate and feed limestone supply them. A broiler-specific vitamin and mineral premix supplies vitamins, including D3, and trace minerals. Use a premix designed for broilers and the correct phase where the supplier makes separate products.

Switching between feeds

- Switch on time. Feeding starter too long adds cost. Switching too early can hold back growth.
- Some farms blend the old and new feed for a day or two to smooth the change.
- Watch water and feed intake around each change.

Measuring success

Track average weight, uniformity, mortality and feed conversion ratio for every batch. See working out the cost of feed per kilogram of gain for a simple way to compare batches and feeds.

Need a diet checked? Send your ingredients and targets to the FeedSport nutrition team on WhatsApp +263 77 468 4534 or sales@feedsport.co.zw.

Figures in this guide are typical values and general ranges. Confirm targets for your animals, genetics and ingredients, and check batch specifications before formulating.