

Common Health Problems in Poultry

Biosecurity and hygiene is very important when keeping any animals and preventing disease. Chickens along with most birds due to being mainly prey animals are very good at disguising illness unless they are very sick. Regularly checking them over and being able to handle them is important to pick up on any early signs of illness. Getting advice and help early on can also make the treatment much more likely to be effective.

Wing feather clipping

It is up to you whether you clip your chicken's wings. This is not a painful procedure, but makes it harder for the birds to fly and escape their enclosure. Clipping the primary flight feathers on one or both wings, removing a third of the feathers length is all that is needed. This will need repeating when the feathers regrow annually. Although beak clipping is sometimes done commercially to prevent feather pecking, beak clipping should not be done at home. Apart from wing clipping, you should always pluck feathers instead of cutting. This will ensure immediate new feather growth, which otherwise would not occur until the chickens next moult.

Worming

Regular worming is advisable, but should be based on a faecal egg count result to help preserve and prevent resistance to the drugs we use. Chickens will pick up infestations from each other, wild birds along with re-infection if not treated effectively; the most effective and only licensed medication in laying birds is Flubenvet (flubendazole). There are several herbal alternatives, but these do not seem to be effective. Keeping the grass short in the enclosure will help reduce worm eggs and parasites allowing them to be destroyed by UV light.

Red mite

As the name suggests these are little red mites that live in the chicken house and feed from the birds at night. They can be very irritant to the birds and can cause the birds to stop laying. In severe cases they can cause anaemia and death. They are not normally noticed on the bird as they generally live in the housing itself. The best way to check for them is along edges, crevices and under lids. Wiping a wet paper towel can help to visualise them as it will generally turn red with an infestation. There are many treatment options, some working better than others. Diatomaceous earth is a product that can be used in the dust bath or sprinkled on the birds regularly to help prevent the problem. Many permethrin-based powders can work, but these have very variable effects. The main treatment should be aimed at treating and disinfecting the chicken house and environment. Speak to your vet if you are concerned.

Mites and Lice

There are several other species of mites and lice which can live and be passed around on birds. These mainly live on the bird unlike the red mite above and can sometimes be seen under and amongst the feathers. General hygiene and some of the treatments above will help to control these but if you have any concerns or you think your chicken has parasites then speak to your vet.

Scaley leg/beak

This is caused by a particular mite that burrows under the skin causing the scales to lift away on the legs and around the beak. These can be very irritating for the bird. There are several treatment options. Vaseline and baby oil can help to soothe the skin and control the mites. Some people suggest surgical spirit to kill the mites, but this can be very painful for the birds. If severe or the birds are in discomfort then advice and treatment should be sought from your vet.

Diarrhoea

Birds do not produce urine and faeces separately and this is normally produced in one pile with the brown droppings in the centre and white uric acid surrounding. 1 in 10 droppings will be the caecal contents and this can appear very diarrhoea like and slightly yellow in colour. Coccidia, worms, viruses, bacteria and other medical conditions such as kidney disease can lead to diarrhoea like signs. Worming should be up to date. If you are concerned see your vet, a poo sample or photo is very handy to look at also.

Egg peritonitis

There can be many causes of this and unfortunately this is more common in older commercial birds. The general principle is that developing eggs end up in the abdomen rather than in the uterus. This presents as a painful, hot swollen abdomen with birds becoming lethargic and going off their food. Sometimes sterile egg peritonitis can occur, but if it is infected then the prognosis is poor. Sometimes this condition can reoccur after treatment, but there are implants that can help to prevent this from happening. Contact your vet for appointment if your chicken is looking unwell.

Crop impaction

This occurs normally around springtime and can be caused by a lack of food or by eating long grass or other long fibre (straw). This causes a blockage in the outflow of the crop, which is the first food storage chamber in the chicken, located at the base of the neck. Emptying the crop manually can help unblock this along with medications if needed, but many times surgery is needed to remove the blockage from the crop. This condition can also reoccur and can be caused by other diseases and problems with the chicken (e.g. egg peritonitis/ sour crop/ gizzard impaction/abdominal masses). It can also be caused by muscle weakness in older birds, when the crop cannot empty as easily due to becoming distended. Speak to your vet for advice.

Feather pecking/loss

Most chickens will have an annual moult and during this time can look a bit dull and scruffy. Other causes of feather loss can be associated with stress, malnutrition, water deprivation and also bullying by other birds. Feather pecking normally occurs in larger flocks and is normally caused by overcrowding or boredom. Chickens are very inquisitive and attracted to shiny colourful objects, so once a chicken has been traumatised and blood is present they will continue to bully and feather peck further. The best control is by either separating the bullied bird or the bird causing the problem. Spraying the area with a blue, purple or white antiseptic spray can help to cover up the area and prevent pecking.

