

Hen Health

Feather Loss

There are several causes of missing feathers and bald spots on poultry which can be split into two groups:

- a) where hens cannot grow feathers or b) where hens pull them off

The usual reason for feathers not developing is a deficiency of proteins, often amino acid, from the diet of the birds. The feathers of hens contain high levels of proteins called methionine. Sulphur is also a major building block of feathers. A methionine deficient hen will often eat feathers in an attempt to satisfy a craving for this amino acid and may even pull them from its own body.

All good poultry feeds should contain enough methionine but if additional treats, kitchen scraps and corn are fed with the layers pellets, then the amount of methionine consumed by the hen can be inadequate for feather growth and development. You can consider buying methionine and adding some to the hen's feed.

If feathers are developed, but are pulled or broken off, the cause is usually related to how the hens live and interact together. Hens that frequently mate may have an absence of feathers, especially on the backs and heads of hens. The males may also have feathers missing from the breast and bottom/vent area. These feathers will grow back after the breeding season is completed in the autumn.

If feathers are missing from the underneath and vent area, the cause is most likely the presence of external parasites such (northern fowl mite or lice). Because the hens are irritated by the pests, they peck at themselves to try and get rid of them, often pulling their own feathers out during the process.

This can be controlled by spraying a pesticide like Permethrin, or rubbing Diatomaceous Earth on the birds, the house and other areas that the birds frequently visit. This will ensure the treatment of any pests that can re-infest the birds. Several applications at 2 to 3 week intervals will kill pests that hatch from eggs that have been laid prior to the spraying (spraying doesn't kill un-hatched eggs).

Obviously each year, a hen will go through a moult and lose all of its feathers, replacing them with new. The moult takes place anytime between September and December, taking about 4-6 weeks. You can help the hen by giving some cooked soya beans for extra protein (soak for 24 hours then simmer for 3 hours).