

Mycoplasma Mycoplasma Gallisepticum infection - a Chronic Respiratory Disease

When we first started keeping hens many years ago, some of ours developed symptoms which we identified as mycoplasma. When we researched the treatment for this, all the older established books we read simply said to 'dispatch affected birds'. Here we explain more about the illness along with treatment and management suggestions. The infection *Mycoplasma gallisepticum* affects chickens, turkeys, game birds, pigeons and wild birds. Ducks and geese can become infected when living with infected chickens. In turkeys it is often referred to as 'infectious sinusitis'.

The virus occurs worldwide and is spread by wild birds, which is why the disease does not affect hens used in battery farm systems because they are kept locked up in biosecure conditions (*but makes them very susceptible to it when re-homed as rescued hens*). When wild birds come down and drink from water and feed from feeders, the virus is easily spread to hens. It is a widely held belief that virtually every outdoor flock of hens/poultry will carry the mycoplasma infection. The symptoms only show when the hens carrying the dormant virus becomes distressed, or unsettled. This can be when introducing new hens, moving hens, after a fox attack or during molting. It can occur when hens are moved to a new location for example being boarded.

The symptoms are:

Small bubbles in the corner of the eye.

Coughing and rattly breathing.

Nose and eye discharge.

Loss of appetite.

Swelling of the sinus area and/or eye.

Stops laying eggs or reduced number of eggs.

Lethargy.

NOTE: Hens often get coughs and colds, so do not automatically assume your hen has mycoplasma. The bubbles in the eye/swollen sinus is the 'tell tale' symptom.

We do not kill affected hens but try to manage it in the following ways. Try to prevent access to your hens feed and water by wild birds. This is difficult but you might try putting water and feed in a small covered area or shed, the use of bird netting etc.

When introducing new hens or moving them to another location, larger poultry keepers of commercial flocks (as a preventative measure) will as a matter of routine, treat their flock with the antibiotic Tylan for 72 hours. Not all poultry keepers want to rely on antibiotics and we suggest giving the equivalent of one clove of garlic per hen in their feed for 7 days when hens are stressed. The garlic helps boost their natural immune system.

The treatment of Mycoplasma symptoms is by the administration of the antibiotic Tylan Soluble at the dose of 0.5g per litre drinking water. 'Old' medicated water must be discarded after 2 days and new medicated water made up (as it stops working after 48 hours). The medicated water is given for 5 to 7 days and works very well. A little Vaseline on sticky eyes works well to stop them sticking closed. Although hens recover, they carry the infection for life and often also transmit the disease to others in the flock, hence the belief that most outdoor flocks all actually have the virus. Hens seem to live quite happily carrying the disease in much the same way as humans may carry the herpes virus which causes cold sores to appear when they are stressed or worn down.

In more commercial free-range flocks, the owners do tend to dispatch any hens that show signs of mycoplasma to try and keep their flocks free of the disease but these flocks are normally only kept for a fixed period of time (often 12 months), before they are replaced with a new flock (called an all in all out approach) with the housing disinfected between flocks. So it is possible to keep a flock free of the virus in the short term, but for those of us who keep birds longer term we would not recommend the culling of infected birds.

We try to manage the virus by using garlic regularly, but if a hen's sinus starts to become swollen we normally see out vet in order to treat with Tylan. This drug has only recently been licensed for poultry so your vet may not know he can now prescribe it. There is no egg withdrawal, once treatment has ended you can eat the eggs. When suffering the symptoms of mycoplasma, a hen is more susceptible to other illness & mite infestations etc so where possible best to separate the hen or hens to allow rest. Remember as with all illnesses, other hens will usually attack or bully hens that show signs of illness, hence the reason why separation is sometimes required.