

Hen Health

Here are the most common health-related things we get asked about regarding hens, but we are happy to try and offer advice if you get stuck.

Hens have stopped laying eggs:

Hens don't really completely stop laying eggs just because they get older, most hens should be able to lay eggs for life. But, as a hen gets older, it will lay less eggs and the eggs will often be bigger. The first 'laying year' is the optimum egg output — say depending on breed nearly an egg a day. The second year there will be a slight drop — say 5 or 6 a week but bigger eggs. Third year onwards again a drop, but bigger eggs. So, what are the reasons why your hen may have stopped laying altogether?

- **Moult:** Each year, a hen will lose its feathers and replace them with new. While a hen is growing new feathers, the protein she eats makes these and so she has to stop laying eggs — not enough protein to do both! The moult usually takes place at the end of the Summer or in the Autumn.
- **Stress:** If a hen gets stressed, then it will stop laying eggs for a while. Hens do become stressed very easily, because they are creatures of habit. Any change to their routine unsettles them, such as being moved, high winds, snow, new arrivals, a fox visiting etc. A vitamin boost (i.e. poultry spice), treats, some extra attention will help relieve stress quicker. They will lay again after this has passed.
- **Diet:** Firstly water is the most important thing, hens need access to clean water (check water drinkers regularly and clean any green mildew which is toxic for hens). It may be a pain keep filling their water drinkers, but it helps if you remember that the more a hen drinks the more eggs they lay. Secondly food, for optimum egg production, you should feed layers pellets and nothing else. Of course it is nice to give hens treats, so corn, maize, vegetables are great to give in moderation but only give them late afternoon. Hens love seafood, pasta, short grass, rice, hot spicy foods, chillies, peppers, in fact anything except meat — but in moderation. If their poo looks like korma lay off the treats completely.

Fleas and Mites: Another reason hens will stop laying eggs is if they have an infestation. Every 4 weeks you should pick each hen up and examine them. Gently pull the feathers apart below their vent and look for any signs of fleas or mites. Fleas are longer, about 1 or 2mm and you can see these moving around. Mites are smaller and darker and appear as a mass of dark. There are lots of different powders or treatments you can try including;

- Spot on (fipro nil) as drops on the back of the hen's neck
- Organic powders or diatomaceous earth ie Diamite
- Cat flea sprays (make sure you avoid contact with the vent)
- Garlic and Ginger given regularly— a clove a day for a week, then a break of 4/5 weeks is a good all-round tonic and can guard against fleas/mites. Just roughly chop the garlic and ginger and mix with feed.

Sore Weepy Eyes

Goldeneye cream available from the chemist works wonders with ducks, geese and hens.

Mycoplasma

This is an infection that poultry can catch, often from wild birds eating their food. The signs of this infection include;

- Sticky discharge from nostrils
- Foamy liquid in corner of eyes - looks like little bubbles
- Swollen sinuses - one side of the face swells up

Infected birds develop respiratory 'rattles', sneeze and sometimes flip their heads to one side and have one or both eyes stuck closed. However, many infections display similar symptoms especially 'cold type' symptoms. It is a mistake to presume that every bird with rattly breathing or other cold like symptoms has mycoplasma. Many poultry books advise killing any birds that are infected with this, but we prefer to treat. Treatment is by administering antibiotics prescribed from your vet. We have used **Tylan Soluble** to good effect, others recommended include **Tylan Soluble** and **Baytril**. You should not eat the eggs for 7 days after the treatment ends (your vet will advise how long).

Please note that Tylan Soluble has only recently been licensed for poultry in 2009, so some vets will not be aware that they can now prescribe it.

Worms (Stomach/Gut Worms/Gape worms)

Please see separate info sheet on worms

Scaly Leg Mite

The legs and feet may become swollen, tender and have flakes forming under the scales. They are found under the scales of the legs and feet, you may see lifting of the scales, and separation from the skin of the leg underneath. Do not think that just because a hen gets older that it will just develop 'Nora Batty' type legs, legs should always remain relatively smooth.

Treatment

This is quite easy really, firstly hold then hen gently and stand it in a bowl of warm water with some disinfectant added such as Detol. After a good soaking, use an old toothbrush to gently brush the legs, facing the brush upwards under the lifted scales on the legs. DO NOT pull scales off, however tempting, as this will make the legs bleed and get infected. Once you have given them a good clean, dry them off and then stand then legs in Surgical Spirit. This is easier to do if you fill an old jam jar with surgical spirit and soak one leg at a time, for about 3-5 minutes. Again wipe off excess, then to finish, smear on thick Vaseline, using your finger and an upwards motion to try and work the Vaseline under the scales. Usually one treatment like this does the job, if not, you can repeat every ten days as severe cases might take 2 or 3 treatments.