

Hen Health – Introducing New Hens

To Quarantine or not?

A lot of people like to quarantine new birds for 1 or 2 weeks to observe them for any signs of illness, before introducing them to their existing birds, particularly if they have expensive or rare breeds of poultry. This way, if the new bird becomes ill (having picked up a virus etc. which has not yet had a chance to develop into the illness) then that way you are more likely to prevent the illness spreading to the other birds. This is always a personal decision, and there is no wrong or right answer. Most people we find who do not quarantine new birds do not find any problem, but that is not to say there is no risk.

Introducing the new hens

It is always better to introduce a minimum of two new hens where possible. When you introduce new hens to your existing flock, we have found that the best way to do this is to wait until it is dark. Once night has fallen, carefully and above all quietly, place your new hens in the house with your existing hens. Don't use a torch, and then creep away. This way the hens all wake up together, and hens (*not being the brightest of creatures*) will often just think that the new hens have „always been there“! If you try and introduce new hens in daylight, the established hens will see them as „intruders“, this will imprint on their minds and they will always think of them as intruders...

Keep an eye on your new arrivals over the next few days. There will be bickering, and you just have to let them peck each other; they are establishing their new pecking order – and it is not called that for nothing! As long as no blood is drawn, best to leave them to it. It does help if you introduce new birds at least in a pair, rather than one on its own.

A note about illness in new birds;

Most of us will have travelled abroad somewhere, and we have been told very clearly not to drink tap water, not to take ice in our drinks etc. The reason being that there are organisms in the water that would cause us severe stomach upsets, because we are not used to them. Yet we see local people drinking water and it causes no ill effects. Well the same applies when introducing new hens.

Sometimes people tell us that their new hens look or act unwell but their existing and established hens are fine (*this is more common when introducing hens to larger established flocks, rather than adding one or two to a group of three or four hens*). As in the example given with the water, hens that are established, often, over time, build up immunity to a number of factors in their environment. This could be a resistance to worms in their soil, or to other organisms. New birds without that resistance may quickly become ill after they arrive; fail to gain weight, or lose weight, become withdrawn etc. yet the original hens thrive. To try and reduce the chances of this happening, the following suggestions should help;

- Try to move the established birds to a piece of land you have rested, and cleansed with lime (see our worm leaflet).
- Worm the new birds and existing birds from the day you introduce them – worming them together, and then re-worm at 6 weeks.

- Add a tonic to the water for all birds, such as poultry spice, or feed garlic at one clove per hen chopped and mixed with feed.
- Treat each hen for mites (see our leaflet on treatments)
- Clean the house thoroughly and spray with disinfectant such as Virkon S.
- Treat the house with creosote inside and out.

There are people who have kept poultry for some years and will say that they “don’t mess about with worming” etc. Very often these are people whose hens have developed a lot of immunity (the ones which survived anyway!) and this is where you most commonly find new birds become ill very quickly. If you follow the advice above you will greatly reduce the impact of introducing new hens. It is good to introduce new hens each year so that your flock gradually rotates over the years.