

Diseases and Ailments.

Chickens kept in a clean, healthy, stress free environment do not usually suffer greatly from many diseases or ailments. The following are some of the more common problems which occur. However prevention is better than cure and many of the following can be avoided with attention to hygiene, feeding and general care.

Signs of ill health.

When feeding your hens, always watch their behaviour. Healthy hens are always alert, keen to eat their food and very active. If any hens are standing alone with their heads down, feathers ruffled and generally disinterested in their food and everything going on around them, chances are they are not feeling well. Separate them immediately into a 'hospital' area and watch for symptoms. Symptoms may include diarrhoea, discharge, lameness, trembling, lack of appetite, runny nostrils, coughing, wheezing and sneezing. Always feed and attend to your healthy birds before a sick one, to avoid the transfer of any disease.

Coccidiosis

This disease is caused by small protozoan parasites, which attack the intestine and are transmitted via the droppings.

Symptoms are white, watery diarrhoea, which may be blood stained. The chickens' wings droop, they become very lethargic and generally waste away. This contagious disease usually affects young birds.

Preventative: Firstly re-evaluate your stocking rate as coccidiosis rarely occurs in hens which are in a clean, natural environment. Secondly, pay attention to hygiene and move hens onto fresh ground on a regular basis to avoid a build-up of droppings.

Treatment: The disease is treatable with Sulphonamide drugs available from a vet, however, prevention of the disease with hygienic living conditions and rotation is far more effective. Chickens can become immune to the disease, as it rarely affects older birds, however the mortality rate in younger birds can be up to 90%.

Marek's Disease

Marek's Disease is a herpes type virus which affects young birds up to about 6 weeks of age. Marek's Disease attacks the nervous system and can also cause tumours. There is no cure for Marek's and affected stock is usually culled. The disease is normally passed on from the mother to the chick by feather particles, so it is best to incubate eggs from stock suspected of carrying Marek's disease.

Symptoms: Wings and legs paralysed in a straddled position, however some birds may suddenly die without symptoms.

Prevention: Chicks can be vaccinated as day olds and this is usually done in large breeding establishments. However it is not feasible for small suppliers or backyard breeders to attempt.

Cure: Once contracted, there is no cure and it is almost always fatal.

Scaly Leg

A mite which burrows in under the scales and skin and leaves white crusty deposits on the legs causes Scaly Leg.

Cure: To cure Scaly Leg it is imperative that the mite be removed. Gently scrub the legs in warm soapy water with a little ammonia to remove the scales. Then apply cooking oil or Vaseline to the legs to suffocate the mite. Alternatively, medications are available from the vet.

Prevention: It is a good idea to clean out all the pens and remove and burn the bedding, as re-infection can occur from old scabs and scales for up to 30 days.

Worms

Worm infestation is one of the most common problems affecting fowls.

Symptoms: Feathers fluffed out, eyes dull and discharging, diarrhoea, weight loss, loss of appetite, and increased thirst are symptoms of worm infestation.

Cure: To cure a worm infestation, *drench* may be purchased from a vet or alternatively, preventative measures can be taken. Overstocking usually causes infestation, where hens are not rotated onto fresh ground, so stocking rates and management practices may need to be addressed. Garlic is generally the accepted organic treatment for worm control and regular doses will prevent worms and add to the general health and well being of your birds.

Lice and Mites

These external parasites are a common problem in poultry. They either feed on the feathers, skin or suck the blood.

Symptoms: The parasites are visible on the birds or on the eggs, should the hen have been sitting. Sometimes, bare skin and eczema patches develop.

Prevention: Allowing the birds access to dust baths is one of the best preventions, as well as feeding regular garlic.

Cure: Application of insecticidal powder and reapplication a week or so later usually helps to clear up the infestation.

Red Mite

Red Mite is probably one of the more common mites to affect chickens. These mites are blood sucking mites and turn from grey to red after feeding on their hosts. Red Mites generally feed at night time when the chickens are roosting and hide in crevices on the roosts during the day.

Rotation of birds, cleaning the coop and dusting with insecticidal powders or herbs will help control the problem.

Caring for the health of your pet chickens is the same as for the care of any animal. Don't wait for them to show you the signs of ill health and then do something about it. Make sure they live in a happy, healthy, clean environment, which allows them access to a variety of food sources and conditions vital to their health. This is the best way to combat disease and ailments.