



A Basic Guide to Chicken Health

Keeping chickens is really easy and they have very few health problems; if they are well cared for. This basic guide looks at chicken health and the common ailments the small flock keeper may encounter.

Parasites

Lice

Poultry lice are wingless, golden coloured insects which are, typically, between 1-3mm in length. They feed upon feathers and dry skin and lay clumps of white eggs, nits, at the base of feathers. An infestation of lice will, at the very least, irritate a chicken. More severe infestations can lead to anaemia, reduced egg production and slow the growth and development of younger chickens.

Chickens rely on dust baths to keep themselves clean and to help rid themselves of external parasites, such as lice and mites. Any chicken affected by lice should be dusted with diatomaceous earth or with a poultry powder which contains Pyrethrium.

Red Mite

The red mite, or coop mite, are tiny blood-sucking insects which appear grey before feeding and red after. Unlike other parasites they do not live permanently live on chickens but, instead, infest crevices in the coop and feed during the night.

To identify these parasites, examine your coop and chickens during the evening and look for tiny grey or red specks. Severe infestations may cause anaemia and even death and your chickens may be reluctant to return to the coop to roost or to use the nest box.

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Tel: 07798652178 Email: HappyGardenHens@outlook.com

It can be difficult to eradicate these pests once they are living within a coop but it can be done. There are various mite coop cleaners and treatments available and these must be used frequently and thoroughly.

Northern Fowl Mite

The Northern Fowl Mite is similar in appearance to the Red Mite and are also blood suckers. However, unlike the Red Mite, the Northern Fowl Mite live, permanently, on poultry and feed both day and night. These parasites generally live around the vent and may cause anaemia and even death. Infestations can be treated with a thorough dusting of poultry lice and mite powder.

Scaly Leg Mite

Scaly Leg Mites are invisible to the naked eye and burrow, and live, beneath the skin and scales on poultry legs. In long-term infestations the scales may appear to lift and scabs, or lumps, can form and even cause deformities. These mites can cause irritation and discomfort but can be treated with Ivermectin; which is available on prescription from your vet.

Worms

Chickens can suffer from many, many different species of worms and will always harbour some. It is important, however, not to let a few wiggly worms turn into an infestation.

Poultry should be wormed, routinely, twice a year or more frequently if the flock is kept on the same piece of ground all year around. Organic wormers, such as Verm-x, are available but these are less effective than wormers such as Flubenvet.

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Common Health Problems

Impacted Crop

Sometimes the exit of the crop can become blocked; often with long vegetation. The crop will become enlarged and feel solid even after the overnight fast. The chicken will lose weight and, generally, appear very unhappy. You can either ask the vet to remove the mass via surgery but this is expensive and dangerous or you can attempt to massage the crop to dislodge the cause of the blockage.

Sour Crop

Sometimes the digestive process slows down and the crop is affected by a fungal infection. The crop will become enlarged and feel soft; this is often accompanied by a foul smell. You can treat this infection with anti-fungal medication which is generally available from your local poultry vet.

Respiratory Infections

Poultry often catch bacterial or viral respiratory infections; these are commonly transmitted from the wild bird population. Symptoms can include coughing, sneezing, swollen sinuses and nasal discharge. If your chickens show any of these symptoms isolate them from the rest of your flock and take the affected bird to the vet for a diagnosis and treatment.

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Chicken Health Check List

Activity levels – Chickens should be active and alert during the day unless the climate is particularly hot or cold.

Beak – Both nostrils should be open and clean with no discharge.

Ears - Both ears should be clean with no discharge; discharge suggests infection.

Eyes – Chicken eyes should look bright and clear with no closed lids, swelling or discharge.

Feathers – Excepting breeding hens and periods of moulting chickens should not be missing large patches of feathers.

Legs and Feet – Scales should lie flat; lifted scales are a sign of Scaly Leg Mites. Swellings or sores under the foot could be Bumblefoot; an infection caused by injury.

Toes – Toes should be straight; not crooked.

Vent – The soft feathers surrounding the vent should be clean with no matting.

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