

CHICKEN HEALTH ASSESSMENT

If you are concerned about your hens health please run through the following list to try to establish what could be wrong. It is not a veterinary guide to treatment, but should give you some ideas to 'google'.

All hens supplied by ourselves come with a lifetime of free advice so please contact us if you have any concerns but have answers to all the following questions ready when contacting us. Please always contact your vet if in any doubt.

SYMPTOM	CHECK	POSSIBLE CAUSE
<i>What colour is her comb?</i>	Bright cherry red is healthy, pale or purple is not.	Pale comb - Red mite or Northern Fowl Mite. Floppy, shrunken comb - Dehydration. Purple comb - heart/circulation problems.
<i>Is she eating & drinking?</i>	Isolate her, ideally in a dog crate or small house and run.	General illness & disease. Crop/gizzard impaction or Sour Crop.
<i>Are her droppings normal?</i>	Isolate her, ideally in a dog crate or small house and place her on newspaper to monitor.	Check out normal droppings at: www.chat.allotment.org.uk/index.php?topic=17568.0 - You will be surprised at what is normal! Yellow, loose droppings every 5th or 6th time are totally normal . Frothy or constant loose droppings can indicate worms. Blood in the droppings - Coccidiosis. Eating mouldy feed or drinking dirty water. Kidney damage. Too much protein in the diet. Virus or bacterial diarrhea.
<i>Does she feel thin?</i>	Feel her breastbone. You should be able to feel a hybrids breastbone but it should not be too prominent, and should have plenty of flesh either side of it (check how your other hens feel for comparison). It is impossible to tell by just looking at her as feathers disguise bodyweight.	A very thin hen indicates a slightly longer term problem. If her weight is good but she looks very poorly it is more likely to be a sudden illness or issue.
<i>Does she feel overweight?</i>	Check if she is generally heavy and has fat over her breastbone or if she has a heavy 'bag' below her legs below the vent.	A fat hen can have laying problems due to internal body fat compressing organs - torpedo shaped eggs can be an indicator. If she has a heavy 'bag' between her legs she could be an internal layer causing peritonitis, a fluid (ascites) build up due to infection.
<i>Is her crop normal?</i>	Check early in the morning before she has eaten or had a drink when it should be empty.	A hard lump indicates Impacted Crop. A loose watery bag indicates Sour Crop.
<i>Is her staple diet ad lib good quality layers ration with access to grit & oyster shell and clean water?</i>	Check food is not damp and water is clean.	Anything less than a hen fed on clean, dry layers rations and clean water and you will have a weak hen prone to illness. Damp, mouldy food is dangerous, ensure layers rations are kept dry and away from rodents.
<i>Has she been wormed recently?</i>	Check if she has constant loose droppings or feels underweight. A loose dropping every 5 or 6th time she goes is normal.	Flubenvet is the only sure way to eliminate worms. Chickens need worming 2-3 times a year with Flubenvet.
<i>Is she standing with her tail pointing down or going in and out of the nest-box?</i>	Check if there is any sign of straining or broken egg around her vent. Does she look very 'heavy' around her back end.	She could be egg bound or have a broken egg internally. If she has been laying internally for a while it could have developed into egg peritonitis.
<i>Does she have any respiratory symptoms?</i>	Look for runny discharge from her nostrils, rattly breathing, breathing with the beak open or making a 'hiccupping' or coughing sound.	Respiratory infections are very common in poultry. If she is looking unwell with respiratory symptoms she will need a course of antibiotics. In hot weather a hen breathing with her beak open can indicate overheating and heat stress.
<i>Is the ventilation in the house correct?</i>	Check if she in a draught in the hen house or there is not enough ventilation. See if you can smell ammonia.	Incorrect ventilation is a very common cause of respiratory problems. Ammonia build up causes respiratory distress and blindness and eye problems.

SYMPTOM	CHECK	POSSIBLE CAUSE
<i>Does she have any lice or mites on her or is there any red mite in the hen house?</i>	Check all over her for lice and mites, lice eggs or small scabs on the skin, particularly check around the vent. Check the house for Red Mite (ash like deposits are a tell tale sign).	Red Mite and Northern Fowl Mite are both killers and spread disease and need aggressive treatment straight away.
<i>Could she have gained access to 'green' water or decaying plants or animals (e.g. a dead mouse)?</i>	Signs of lethargy or weakness, paralysis and death.	Botulism (which is produced in decaying animals and stale water) can cause weakness, paralysis and death. As chickens are not herbivores they will readily pick up and eat dead animals (just watch them with a worm!). More common in hot weather.
<i>Could she have gained access to rat/mouse poison or slug pellets?</i>	Sudden death.	Check if your neighbours are poisoning rats or mice - the rats can carry the poisoned grain and drop it where the hens can access it - Its bright colour makes it irresistible to chickens.
<i>Have the hens been exposed to any stress?</i>	Have you done anything that could have upset the birds e.g. introduced new birds, had a fox attack, low flying planes, moved houses etc. Stress is a trigger for most poultry problems.	All chickens carry their own diseases (however healthy they appear), most lay dormant and never cause a problem but when mixing new birds they can pass between the birds. Stress will also cause a flare up of existing or dormant disease.
<i>Is she low down the pecking order?</i>	Indicated by a slightly more timid hen who possibly hangs back when feeding.	Often the hen at the bottom of the pecking order is slightly weaker than the others. This is because their position in the flock means they are last to feed so can always be a little smaller and more vulnerable than the other hens, and therefore more likely to have lower immunity.
<i>Is she lame?</i>	Check pad of the foot for swellings or injury. Feel all up the leg for any signs of heat or swelling. Check if the leg scales are raised up. Check it is not paralysis rather than lameness.	Bumblefoot causes an infected lump in the foot. Scaly leg mite will cause raised leg scales. Some respiratory infections cause swelling of the joints and lameness.
<i>Is she refusing to leave the nest box?</i>	If she won't leave the nest and makes a loud 'squawk' when you try and touch her whilst fluffing up her feathers. Try lifting her out and putting her on the ground to ensure she can walk & is well.	Broodiness - Place her in a broody crate for a few days. Dog crates are ideal for this, place her in with just newspaper for bedding and access to food and water. Place it in a dry, cool place out of draughts to break the broodiness. The idea is for her not to be able to make a nest where she is.
<i>Is she laying soft shelled eggs?</i>	Is every single egg she lays soft shelled? All hens will lay a 'softie' every now and then, especially when something has shocked them as they eject the egg before it is finished. If she is 18 months or older and a hybrid her egg shell quality will naturally begin to decline.	Ensure her staple diet is layers ration with access to mixed grit and oyster shell and clean water. Try increasing the calcium levels by adding a calcium supplement/Limestone flour along with cod liver oil for vitamin D to enable the calcium to be absorbed. If every egg for more than a few weeks are soft it could be permanent damage to the egg shell gland caused by an infection. Soft shelled eggs being laid can start an egg eating habit. This can usually be stopped by using roll away nest-boxes or fitting Bumpa Bits to the hens for a short period to break the habit.
<i>Is she losing feathers?</i>	Check where the feathers are being lost from.	If it is a general 'thinning' with feather quills growing through the skin it will be an annual or mini moult. Totally bald areas with no feather regrowth are caused by feather pecking.

If your hen is showing signs of illness I would recommend isolating her straight away and keeping her at a comfortable room temperature. Thin, sick birds are unable to regulate their body heat & can be a target for the other hens to bully.