



THINGS TO AVOID TO MAXIMISE PROFIT IN LAYING HENS

To get the most from your flock it is crucial that birds are kept as healthy as possible. There are several problems you need to be vigilant about.

Avian Influenza (AI) is a notifiable disease that is becoming more widespread and prevalent in wild bird populations meaning that there is now an untreatable reservoir in the wild, leading to more outbreaks in commercial flocks. Anyone experiencing higher mortality, lethargy, or production issues should call a vet immediately. Insurance was available but now with given the prevalence of the disease, it is being curtailed or withdrawn by many insurers.

Red mite - these are pin-head size blood-sucking parasites that are red when feeding. They can cause serious performance issues and aid the spread of disease. They are easy to find under surfaces such as nest box lids, feeder drinker joints and capped dry manure. With high infestations they may be seen on eggs.

They are impossible to eliminate so the objective has to be to keep levels of infestation as low as possible. Insecticide is used to control them but it is hard to apply effectively in large poultry buildings and frequency of treatment becomes onerous during warmer periods.

Exzolt™ a water based medication is available and is effective if applied correctly but only has a transitory effect. It is expensive and lasts for months as long as red mites are kept out. If red mites are re-introduced on clothing, egg trays, brushes etc they will quickly cause problems.



Worms There are four different types.

- Round worms are large and can sometimes be seen in droppings;
- Hairworms very small, can be seen but are short and thin;
- Caecal worms can carry the protozoa that causes blackhead which is more of an issue in free range systems, particularly with turkeys;
- Gape worms cause birds to gasp for breath and are more common in pheasants.

Worming should be carried out regularly. Flubenvet and Gallifen are proven in-feed wormers. Water administration is possible but in free range flocks drinking outside from puddles can reduce its effectiveness.

Identification of intestinal worms is through muck sampling. This is a cheap way of identifying if worms are present but a negative result is not a guarantee that birds are not infected.

Coccidiosis - generally results in poor doing, hunched, lethargic birds and increased mortality. Young birds less than five weeks old are particularly prone and that is why it is advisable to use a coccidiostat in the feed.

Always read the feed label and do not mix feeds containing different coccidiostat without first seeking advice from your feed advisor. Ensure that any withdrawal periods stated on the feed label are adhered to.

Vaccination is possible (Paracox, Evalon etc) but not really practical for small numbers of birds.

Coccidiosis caused by tenella can be easily spotted as it causes blood in the droppings. Easy diagnosis is via muck samples.

When feeding turkeys be aware that monensin will kill turkeys if they have not been fed it from a very young age. In addition feeds with different coccidiostats should not be mixed as this results in the birds getting half doses of the coccidiostat leading to poor if any protection.

Vent pecking/cannibalism can be a serious problem in free range birds and it is not always easy to identify. Vent pecking can occur when an egg is laid and another hen in the nest will peck at the vent causing internal injuries. These can become infected and cause egg peritonitis or other disorders which lead to death. The original cause of death is commonly missed. Vent pecking is a learnt behaviour and all measures should be taken to prevent it starting, including light intensity, light colour, restricting egg size, nest box availability.

Seasonal weather management - As we approach winter, ensure that the free range unit especially if a flat deck, is warmed to some degree before housing new birds. Pullets coming off warm deep litter (which can be present even in buildings with tables) at 20°C will have a temperature shock if the weather is cold, frosty and damp.

Keep an eye out on egg weight as cold weather can increase feed intake and sometimes egg weight when not required. Feather condition may be key in such circumstances. In cold weather feeding a slightly lower specification diet may be an option.

In the summer, egg weight can be seriously affected by hot weather as feed intake can be reduced. As well as a welfare issue this can seriously impact egg income. Every effort should be taken to reduce the effects of heat stress such as providing plenty of fresh cool water, maximising ventilation and possibly misting.

If hot weather is forecast, it may be cost effective to feed a better quality more expensive diet. Supplementary vitamin C in the drinking water is thought to aid heat stress in chickens but good planning is needed.

Talk to your poultry specialist about tackling these problems to improve productivity in your flock.