



Performing a Physical Exam on a Chicken

Edited by

Teresa Y. Morishita, DVM, PhD, Dipl ACPV

Poultry Veterinarian and Professor of Poultry Medicine & Food Safety

Disease spreads quickly through flocks. Therefore, it is important to be able to tell when an animal is abnormal (physically or behaviorally) as this may be indicative of an illness. By observing the bird's behavior in the flock, as well as performing a physical exam, one can potentially prevent the spread of disease to other birds through early disease detection.

Restraining the bird is important when performing a physical exam. It is important to keep the bird calm so that it does not hurt itself or the handler. If the bird appears stressed, place light linen over the head until the bird calms. To hold the bird for examination, reach over the back and hold the wings down to restrain it. Then, pick the bird up and insert your fingers between the legs. Restraining the bird upside down is not ideal as it may increase the stress level of the bird. This action may also cause regurgitation and possibly subsequent aspiration pneumonia. After the bird is restrained, the exam can begin. If the physical exam is performed in the field, it is best to do it early in the morning (especially in the summer) to reduce the stress on the bird.

General Appearance

When investigating a bird's health, one should first observe the bird's appearance and behavior from a distance. In general, a healthy bird is bright, alert, and responsive to

the environment and interacting with the flock. They will have a healthy appetite and egg production will be uninterrupted. A chicken with abnormal behavior would include a bird that is outcast from the others; reluctant to move; or has decreased water or food intake. If any of these signs are observed, a physical examination is warranted.

Head and Neck



When examining this region of the bird, one should observe a red, non-flaccid comb, free of scabs. The bird should hold the head high, indicative of good muscle tone, and be free from swelling

Eyes



The eyes of a healthy bird should be clear, bright and round, and opened wide. The pupil margin should be round with well-defined margins. The eyes should not be cloudy and should be free of any discharge.

Nostrils and Beak



The external nares (nostrils) should be clear and free of any discharge, crust, and scratches. The beak should be smooth, free of cracks, and the tips should come to a point. Suspicion should be raised if

there are any scratches in the beak; cracks; or the tips do not meet.

Feathers and Vent



Evaluation of the feathers is important as it may reveal parasitic infestation or evidence of pen mate aggression in the flock. On examination, the feathers should lay flat against the body and

be well preened. Lift up the feathers and check the base of the feather shaft. This area should be clear and free from parasites. Part the feathers to check for lice and mites. Lice may lay their eggs at the base of the feather shaft, and appear as white clumps. The feathers in the tail and vent region should also be clean and free from any fecal material as white urate build-up or pasty vents may be indicative of a urinary or intestinal disease, respectively.

Breast Muscle

The muscles should be full and firm. By gently pressing fingers on the breast muscle, one can get an idea of the

muscle tone. If the breastbone is easily palpated, it may be indicative of weight loss and/or a chronic disease. Blisters appearing on the breast may indicate the bird has been down for a period of time.

Wings

The wings can be extended and examined for swelling or lacerations and palpated for broken bones and other possible injuries. The bird should not exhibit pain when the wings are extended.

Legs and Feet



The scales on the feet should be smooth and closely adhered to each other and straight. Up-turned scales may be the result of a scaly leg mite infestation. The bottoms of the feet should also be free from scratches, swelling, scabs or ulcerations. The top picture illustrates nails that are too long and are in need of trimming. Long nails are often seen in birds kept in cages. The bottom picture demonstrates the beginning stages of bumblefoot as evidenced by the scabbing.



Revised in 2019 from Original Source: Spiegle, S.J., A.J. Ison, and T.Y. Morishita. Performing a physical exam on a chicken. . Extension Factsheet, Veterinary Preventive Medicine. The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, #VME-20-04, 2004.