



College of Veterinary Medicine

Preventive Medicine for Backyard Chickens

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Backyard poultry can be pets as well as a food source (i.e., eggs), and this creates several problems for the hobbyist from a disease prevention standpoint. Many backyard flock owners have different backgrounds in diagnosing common poultry diseases. It is often a challenge to recognize and associate different clinical signs with disease.

Show and exhibition chickens are often exposed to other chickens from different regions of the state or country. This exposes these chickens to diseases which they might not have been previously exposed. In addition, the stress of long-distance transportation to shows and the repeated handling at the shows suppresses the immune system of the chicken, thereby allowing opportunistic microorganisms to proliferate and cause disease. The co-mingling of older chickens and younger chickens leaves the younger birds at a higher risk of contracting a disease because the immune system of the older birds is better developed than the younger birds.

Visitors and other hobbyists at shows or at the farm pose a serious threat to the chickens if proper biosecurity is not maintained. Most common diseases and parasites of chickens can be avoided through sound methods of management, feeding, sanitation, and preventive treatment.

How Diseases Occur

Diseases can be introduced into a backyard flock through many ways unnoticed by the owner. This could be through visitors to the farm or a neighbor who also has a backyard flock. Comingling young and older birds predisposes younger birds to diseases from the older birds. Improper disposal of manure and dead birds attract flies and other pests that might act as disease vectors to the chickens. Not quarantining new birds from another flock to evaluate their disease status can be a potential source of disease introduction into a flock. Rodents and free-living birds are also a source of disease introduction into a poultry flock. Not properly disposing dead birds can be a source of infection for the other birds. Here are some suggestions that can help keep your flock healthy.

If possible, wear clean clothing and use proper hand washing with antibacterial soap when working between species and different ages of birds. If this is not possible, work with younger birds first before handling the older birds; and work with the healthy birds prior to handling the sick birds. These suggestions, along with other good husbandry practices, should provide the poultry hobbyist with a healthy and happier flock.

Tips for Disease Prevention

Things to Do:

1. Thorough cleaning, scrubbing and disinfection of the poultry house is very important in sanitation.
2. It is not recommended that chickens, either young or old, be raised on old litter used by a previous flock of birds.
3. Do not bring poultry, particularly adult birds from other flocks, and mix them immediately with your flock.
4. Do not permit visitors in your poultry houses if they have had contact with or visited other poultry farms. Moreover, if there are any visitors, they should not be wearing clothes and shoes (or other items) that have come into contact with other birds.
5. Prevent other birds (e.g. sparrows, pigeons) from contacting your chickens.
6. Purchase feed from a reliable source. Do not use old moldy feed.
7. Vaccinations are important in disease prevention, if needed.
8. Provide a well-ventilated but draft-free building with appropriate space available for the number of chickens housed.
9. Properly dispose of all dead birds and old litter.
10. Keep all sick chickens separated from the rest of the flock.
11. In the event of a disease outbreak in your flock, get an accurate diagnosis as soon as possible.
12. If the hobbyist also has pet birds of different species (e.g. parrots), extreme care must be exercised when doing daily routines between the different species of birds.

Rationale for Doing Them:

- This keeps bacteria, viruses, and parasites from building up and also eliminates unwanted rodents.
- Exposing birds to old litter is not recommended as the litter may have a build-up of disease agents to which the new flock has not been exposed. This can result in a disease outbreak.
- Chickens need at least a 3-4 week period to be quarantined in a separate area and be monitored for any disease development.
- Visitors can transfer diseases through their clothing, shoes, and unwashed hands.
- These free-living birds can carry diseases and parasites to your chickens.
- For health and productivity, chickens require a nutritionally balanced feed.
- Chicks and pullets should be vaccinated so as to develop antibodies against common poultry diseases if they reside in an area that has that disease.
- This reduces ammonia build-up; stress; and pen-mate fighting.
- This reduces flies and odor and decreases potential transmission. Flies can be carriers of disease from infected birds to healthy birds. Disposing of birds improperly can create a source of odor and attract flies.
- Diseases can be spread through direct contact with infected birds.
- Since some diseases show similar clinical signs, it is important to get an accurate diagnosis in order to provide an effective treatment plan.
- Pet birds, like parrots, can pose a serious threat to chickens because they can harbor disease that can be very devastating to a chicken flock.

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