

FARM ANIMAL NEWSLETTER

Backyard poultry



Over the past few years there has been a tremendous growth in the number of people keeping chickens. This trend has also continued during the lockdown period with many looking for more

sustainable ways of producing food and the ability to stretch out visits to the shops.

The aim of this article is to provide a brief overview of some of the more common ailments affecting our backyard friends and provide useful information to new and experienced keepers.

Grit

Grit is essential for effective digestion in birds. Chickens have no teeth and instead have a mechanical stomach (*Gizzard*) to grind up their food. Most grits also have oyster shell which boosts calcium levels and helps keep the egg shell strong.

Mites



Small red mites (*Dermanyssus gallinae*) that live in the chicken house and feed from the birds at night. They cause irritation and can stop birds from laying. If left untreated it can progress to anaemia and even death. The mites normally go undetected on the bird as they generally live in the housing itself.

The best way to identify them is to check along edges of the housing and wipe a white cloth or paper towel along the surface and look for a red streak.

Multiple treatments exist, such as permethrin-based powders, however, cleaning and disinfecting the environment is just as important. Be warned eradication can be difficult and time consuming.

Burrowing mites of the genus *Cnemidocoptes* can cause feather loss (Depluming itch) or scaldiness of the skin particularly on the legs (Scaly leg, *Cnemidocoptes mutans*). Vaseline and baby oil can help to soothe the skin. Surgical spirit will kill the mites, but will cause pain when applied to the legs.

Lice

Another ectoparasite that effects birds. The yellow body louse (*Menacanthus stramineus*) is around 3mm long can be seen on birds on

the skin most noticeably around the cloaca or base of feathers.

Worming

Worms can cause a number of problems including enteritis, ill-thrift or even transmit other diseases, for example the *Heterakis* worm can transmit Blackhead.

Gapeworms live in the trachea (*windpipe*) of birds and cause birds to make the classical open-mouthed posture known as gape.



As such regular worming is sensible and in an ideal world would be based on faecal egg count results to prevent resistance to the worming products. Keeping grass short can help UV exposure but treatment usually involves in feed medication such as flubenvet

(*flubendazole*) or in water treatment such as panacur aquasol.

Egg peritonitis

This condition is caused when eggs that ovulate from the ovary fail to enter the uterus and develop in the birds abdomen. Affected hens present having painful, hot swollen abdomens. Birds will be lethargic in nature and may display suppressed appetites. Sterile egg peritonitis can occur but if coupled with infection the prognosis is extremely poor.

Crop impaction

Most commonly occurring due to a blockage in the outflow of the crop (the first storage chamber of the digestive system) and typically associated with long fibres accumulating in this chamber. Manual extraction can be possible but commonly surgery is indicated to remove the blockage.

Marek's

Marek's disease is caused by a herpesvirus and can cause significant mortality and disease. Marek's is widespread and treatment is not possible, but prevention is possible through vaccination in commercial flocks. The disease may present in 2 main ways. The classical form, with paralysis of legs and/or wings, and sometimes the neck (*torticollis*) with peripheral nerve enlargement; or the acute form with multiple tumours. Sadly diagnosis is usually made on post mortem examination.

Avian influenza

Avian influenza (bird flu) is a virus that can infect any bird. There are 2 forms of the virus, highly pathogenic and low pathogenic. The pathogenicity indicates the severity of the disease. This disease is notifiable in the UK and if you experience any acute increase in the mortality rate in your flock then please notify the vets or the Animal and Plant Health Agency.

Contd. overleaf

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TB Testers: Jacek (Jack) Andrychiewicz • Petre Balanescu • Ovidiu Mircea-Oltean • Tudor Patcas • Diego Sainz Garcia • Javier Sisamon • Krasimir (Kris) Stefanov

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Pam Strange • Victoria Tully • Millie Whitlock

Zoonotic risks

Healthy birds can harbour potentially zoonotic (transferable to man) organisms such as Salmonella and Campylobacter. Owners/keepers should wear suitable protective clothing and practice good personal hygiene when handling birds.

Legality of medication and withdrawals

Chickens are legally food producing animals. Despite being pets to many, they are still classed as farm animals and are under the umbrella of food producing animal dispensing laws. Unfortunately, there are very few licensed products for treating backyard poultry. Many products we use to treat ailments and conditions are 'off license'. This means the medicine has not been tested in the species and no data exists on its safety in terms of dosage, route of administration or treatment intervals. **If 'off license' drugs are used in your chickens, eggs should not be eaten for at least 7 days and meat for 28 days after the last dose of medication has been given.**



Defra registration for 50+ birds – IRA81

If you keep more than 50 birds by law, you must register using the compulsory registration form IRA81 (found on direct.gov website). You must do this within one month of keeping 50 or more birds on your premises. You are breaking the law if you do not register.

Euthanasia

Although not a subject we would like to discuss it is an important consideration for anyone keeping livestock. There are several different methods and for most a trip to the vets for a sick bird to be injected would be most appropriate. Cervical dislocation is an option but is not the most welfare friendly decision. There are also more specialist dispatcher



tools on the market which perhaps offer a more humane method of dispatching birds. Burying birds is illegal and incineration is more appropriate.

If you wish to discuss any of your poultry issues with a vet please do not hesitate to contact us.

Out of hours

A reminder that if there is ever any difficulty in reaching the vet on call out of hours, we have a permanent answering service, Phoneta, who will take your call and then go on to contact the relevant vet. They can be reached on 01432 381440.

Pasturella



As the autumn approaches the change in weather is already bringing with it a trickle of pasteurellosis cases in lambs in certain areas.

Any sheep can be affected including ones that have been vaccinated in the spring. This is due to the Pasteurella component of the vaccine only lasting for a limited period. Some of you will have a well-documented history of cases in your flocks and will be boosting ewes and any remaining lambs at this time of year already but for those that are not it would be recommendable to get any sudden deaths in the flock investigated by us. If pasteurellosis is identified as being an issue a single booster of Pasteurella vaccine will protect against any further losses. This can be done with either Heptavac P or Ovivac P regardless of the primary vaccine given and will not affect the timing of your usual annual booster with your normal vaccine pre-lambing.

Cerebrocortical Necrosis

Cerebrocortical Necrosis (CCN) is a neurological disorder seen in ruminants. The main cause is a deficiency of thiamine (Vitamin B1) which is normally produced by bacteria in the rumen of cattle and sheep on well-balanced roughage diets.



A calf showing 'star gazing' behaviour

It has also been suggested that excess intake of sulphur, lead or sodium may lead to CCN.

Initial signs of CCN include agitation, muscle twitching, holding the head high,

a high-stepping gait, blindness or 'star gazing' and head pressing. This progresses to the animal going down, seizures, paddling, arching the head right back towards the spine, and death.

CCN can occur throughout the year in all ages and classes of stock though it is most common when there is a sudden change to the feed composition, and more so when stock are fed high carb and low fibre rations. Most outbreaks are sporadic and affect only a couple of animals in a mob.

Treatment for CCN involves multiple Vitamin B1 injections, the first of which needs to be given into the vein. The success of treatment depends on the stage of the disease when the animal is treated, the earlier the better!

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