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# Cannibalism



“Henpecked” seems innocent enough, unless you’re on the receiving end!

Feather-pecking is a natural expression of dominance in poultry flocks. The severity of the damage associated with feather-pecking can be influenced by management factors and the breed of hens. Pecking behavior leads to feather damage, feather loss, reduced ability to regulate body temperature and reduced egg production in affected birds.

In some cases, feather-pecking leads to bleeding at the feather site. Bleeding attracts more pecking, not only by the dominant hen but by all members of the flock. Severe injury, resulting in culling or death may result. If left in the coop a severely injured or dead bird will be cannibalized by the flock.

Vent-picking is usually a problem when birds begin to lay, either for the first time or returning to egg production after molting. Vent-picking occurs immediately after an egg is laid while the mucus membrane is exposed. It’s more prevalent in overcrowded floor systems with birds laying eggs on the floor.

There may be a genetic component to feather-pecking, since the light breeds are more prone to the behavior than the heavier breeds. Feather-pecking can also be a learned behavior; once one bird starts the practice in your coop, the others quickly learn to join in. Once feather-pecking and cannibalism have occurred in your flock, it is a difficult habit to break. While there is no agreement on the exact causes of feather pecking and cannibalism, there are things you can do to limit or prevent pecking in your flock.

- **Provide adequate floor** space for the age, number and size of the birds.
- **Provide adequate space at food and water**, provide free-choice feed and water at all times. A little too much is better than not enough.
- **Provide enough nesting sites**. Nest boxes should be 12" x 12" x 12", fairly private and dark inside. You should provide 1 nest box for every 5 hens in the flock. Again, too many is better than not enough.
- **Moderate the light intensity**. High light intensity and continuous lighting cause stress that can lead to pecking.
- **Provide proper nutrition**. Feather-pecking may have a nutritional component. Feed a diet balanced for the age and stage of production of your flock.
- **Remove injured and dead birds from the flock**. Injured and dead birds, regardless of the cause, may be pecked and cannibalized by the flock. This may not only cause the spread of disease in your flock, but may also promote pecking and cannibalism.

- **Provide enrichment or entertainment for the birds.** Birds confined to a coop or pen with all of their food and water needs met, may become bored. Enrichment could be as simple as an enclosed run where the birds can hunt insects, peck the soil, and eat grass and seeds. Some flock owners give hens a small amount of fresh greens daily or hang a head of cabbage at bird's-eye height. Other enrichment devices include white and yellow strings hung for the birds to peck. This will direct the pecking in a less destructive direction.
- **Consider beak-trimming.** Beak-trimming makes the beak blunt by removing the tip of the beak and is common in commercial flocks. It is intended to reduce pecking and cannibalism. A portion of the beak is removed before the chicks are 5 weeks old. Public concern over beak-trimming has made this practice less common for the home flock.
- **Apply blinders or specs.** Applied to the beak, these devices prevent the birds from seeing directly ahead and make it difficult to aim a peck at another bird. They have been used in game-bird production, but aren't practical in layer flocks.

If an outbreak of feather-pecking and cannibalism occurs in your flock, evaluate management practices in your flock. Alter or correct anything that may be causing stress, as stress has been shown to lead to pecking and cannibalism. Remove injured birds from the flock or treat wounds with pine tar to discourage pecking. Implementing enrichment or entertainment will distract the birds long enough to break the habit.

Oil of ipecac or some of the Bitter Apple products applied to the feathers also might reduce the incidence of feather-picking.

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