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EGG EATING FEATHER PICKING AND CANNIBALISM

● *HOW TO CONTROL
THESE PROBLEMS
IN YOUR POULTRY FLOCK*

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NORTH DAKOTA AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE
EXTENSION SERVICE
FARGO, NORTH DAKOTA



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EGG EATING

Egg eating by hens usually is a result of eggs being broken in the nests. After the hens have developed a taste for eggs, egg-eating is hard to control.

PREVENT BROKEN EGGS

Following are some of the most common reasons for broken eggs: (1) Thin or soft shells; (2) not enough nests for the flock; (3) nests not properly bedded; (4) nests so constructed that hens crowd into them, or so deep that eggs are broken when hens jump down into the nests.

Soft shelled eggs are usually due to one of the following: A natural defect in the egg organs of the hen, not enough shell-forming minerals in the hens' feed, or a lack of vitamin D in the feed. The hen must have vitamin D before she can make efficient use of the minerals in the ration.

Other conditions which may encourage egg eating and which should be corrected are crowding too many hens into the house; failure to feed the hens enough; and dirty floors and equipment which encourage the birds to be inactive and to roost on the nest.

PROPER FEEDING AND MANAGEMENT
WILL PREVENT EGG EATING, BUT
CORRECTING THE PROBLEM ONCE
IT IS PRESENT IS MUCH MORE
DIFFICULT.

SUGGESTIONS TO CONTROL EGG EATING

1. Allow at least 3½ square feet floor space per hen in the house. Keep house clean. Provide plenty of fresh air and sunshine.
2. Keep floor covered with not less than 6 inches of clean, dry straw. This encourages hens to greater activity in scratching for feed.
3. Feed the grain ration in the straw litter on the floor. Give a light feeding in the morning - 2 to 3 quarts for 100 hens. This keeps hens busy looking for feed. They will not be sitting around on the nests waiting for another hen to lay an egg for them to eat. The evening feeding of grain should be about double the amount fed in the morning.
4. Keep the mash hopper filled with a good, balanced laying mash, or high protein concentrate so the hens can eat when they are hungry. Keep water containers clean and filled with clean water. Water should be warmed during cold weather.
5. Provide one nest for every five hens. Keep nests clean and bedded with dry straw. Nests should be of a size suited to the size of your hens. Gather eggs often.
6. Darkening nests by hanging a strip of burlap in front so as to partly close the entrances may help.
7. Supply plenty of shell-forming minerals, such as oyster shell, calcite or crushed limestone.
8. One quart of tested cod liver oil added to each 100 pounds of the laying mash is advisable during the winter months. Cod liver oil provides vitamin D. Commercially prepared laying mashes usually contain cod liver oil or some other form of vitamin D.
9. A more drastic measure to take in serious cases is to clip off the end of the beak of each hen with a sharp knife. The beak is then tender and sensitive, and the hens will not peck very hard on an egg.
10. As a last resort it may be necessary to watch the flock closely and to kill a few of the worst offenders. The hen that sits on the edge of the nest and waits for another hen to lay an egg for her to eat is not usually laying very many eggs herself.
11. Bundles of unthreshed grain or of alfalfa or any similar material, hung in the house for the hens to peck at have proved helpful in some cases. The idea is to keep the hens busy.

FEATHER PICKING AND CANNIBALISM

CONDITIONS WHICH MAY LEAD TO THIS TROUBLE:

1. Crowding too many chicks or hens in brooding and laying houses, or not enough feeding space and hoppers.
2. Damp floor litter and insanitary conditions.
3. Wet feeds, or any other condition which may cause the feathers to become soiled.
4. Feeds lacking necessary feed elements or in any spoiled condition, or faulty feeding methods.
5. Inheritance may be a factor with some breeds and some strains.
6. In general, any condition which encourages idleness and reduces exercise.

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SUGGESTIONS FOR PREVENTION AND CONTROL FEATHER PICKING AND CANNIBALISM

BABY CHICKS:

1. Do not crowd. Provide 1/2 square feet floor space per chick started. Increase the space per chick after 3 or 4 weeks by use of a screened or slatted sun porch. Plans for sun porch are available from NDAC Poultry Department.
2. Provide 8 to 10 feet hopper feeding space per 100 chicks started. Increase feeding space and use larger hoppers as chicks grow.
3. Supply feed only in hoppers. Do not use wet feed.
4. Use a complete and well balanced ration. Be sure needed proteins, minerals and vitamins are present.
5. Keep feed hoppers, water containers and all equipment clean.
6. Provide low roosts at rear of brooder when chicks are 4 weeks old or before.
7. Keep floor bedded with clean dry litter to encourage exercise. Keep them busy.
8. Hang up bundles of green alfalfa, dandelion leaves or any other similar material for chicks to peck at.
9. If the trouble starts it may help to smear the parts affected with axle grease or one of the commercial products for this purpose.
10. Sometimes it helps prevent and overcome this trouble to cover the windows and light bulbs with a coat of thin red paint. Makes everything look rosy.
11. Sometimes a little extra salt in mash or drinking water helps.

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LAYING HENS:

1. Do not crowd. Allow at least 3 square feet, floor space per hen for Leghorns and 3½ square feet per hen for heavier breeds.
2. Keep the floor bedded with clean, dry straw, or with other litter.
3. Provide not less than 20 to 24 feet hopper space per 100 hens.
4. Be sure the house is clean, dry, well lighted, and well ventilated.
5. Scatter about 2 quarts wheat or barley per 100 hens in the floor litter each morning to stimulate exercise. Keep hens busy.
6. Hang up bundles of unthreshed grain, alfalfa, or any similar material for hens to peck at. Mangels are also helpful.
7. If the trouble gets started it may help some to clip the end of the upper part of the beak with a sharp knife or with tin snips. Be careful not to start bleeding.
8. Some authorities recommend feeding whole oats in an open hopper all the time and others suggest adding up to 2 percent of salt in laying mash or adding a level tablespoon of salt to a gallon of water every other day.
9. Be sure the laying mash is complete and contains needed proteins, minerals and vitamins.
10. In general, keep hens busy, and keep the house clean, being sure the hens get proper feed and drink at all times.
11. In extreme cases it may be necessary to spend a little time watching the flock and to remove or even kill some of the worst offenders.
12. There are also numerous cannibalism control commercial devices, paints, salves, beak guards etc. for sale by poultry supply dealers.