

Preparation of drinking equipment for hens transitioning from rearing to laying phase in cage-free housing systems

Problem

During the transition from rearing to laying phase, hens may experience stress and difficulty adapting to new housing conditions, including new drinking equipment, which may affect their welfare and productivity.

Solution

Preparing pullets during the rearing phase for housing conditions, including drinking equipment, they will encounter during the laying phase will facilitate the transition.

Benefits

Less stress and a quicker adaptation of the hens to (new) drinking equipment after the transition to the laying phase will improve the welfare of the hens and decrease problems related to water intake.

Practical recommendations

Rearing phase:

- **Adjust the height** of the drinker to the height of the pullets.
- **Adjust water pressure:** increasing water pressure during the first days may promote easier water flow through the nipples and drops on the nipples may attract chicks. Once the chicks are adapted, water pressure can be reduced to prevent water spillage.
- Supplementary chick drinkers (e.g. open water) can be provided the first few days but **need to be removed and replaced by the permanent (nipple) drinkers later** to prevent reliance on the supplementary drinkers.
- **Match drinking equipment** with the same type the birds will encounter in the laying phase. Prevent differences in open vs. closed drinkers, colour of the nipples, presence of cups, water flow or pressure. If equipment does not match between farms, try exchanging every 10th nipple with one in the right colour or place a cup underneath.
- **Positioning of drinkers**, particularly if pullets are reared for laying housing systems in which water is provided on higher tiers. Training of the pullets is needed to find water: e.g. by closing random water lines periodically to encourage the pullets to look for water in the house.

APPLICABILITY BOX

Theme

Animal husbandry

Keywords

Laying hens, pullets, drinking equipment

Context

Transition and operating cage-free housing systems for laying hens

Application time

All year round

Period of impact

Both during the rearing and laying phase.

Equipment

Drinking equipment

Best in

All cage-free housing systems: barn, free-range and organic production

Target audience

Farmers, farm advisors



Figure 1: Pullets drinking on drinking equipment example. (Source: WUR)

Laying phase:

- **Prepare drinkers at least 4 h before arrival of the hens:** disinfect drinker lines and other equipment, flush the lines and refill with clean fresh water, check the pressure (back and front of the house) and test (individual) nipples for the presence of water and absence of leaks.
- Position drinker lines **above slatted floors** (to prevent wet litter) **and in front of nest boxes** (to attract hens to the nest boxes).
- Light intensity near the drinking lines should be around **20 lux**.
- Hens with intact beaks tend to have more difficulty drinking from nipple drinkers and spill more water. A correct type of drinker, correct positioning and cups underneath the drinkers can help and prevent spilling.

On-farm application

System approach: ensure alignment in the management of the rearing and laying farm.

Evaluation: Check drinking equipment daily and register water intake on flock level.

Further information

Further readings

EU guidelines: https://ec.europa.eu/food/system/files/2021-06/aw_platform_plat-conc_guide-welfare-pullets_0.pdf

Management guide of the HSI: <https://www.hsi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Management-Guide-for-cage-free-hens.pdf>

About this practice abstract and Best Practice Hens

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Best Practice Hens: To support egg production in non-cage systems and improve animal welfare, a consortium consisting of 7 partners will develop Best Practices for Non-cage Egg Production Systems as a European Commission, DG SANTE pilot project. These Best Practices will provide practical support to egg producers to encourage them to convert from cage to non-cage systems, including organic production.

Project website: www.bestpracticehens.eu/

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