

Beak trimming of laying hens

Problem

Beak trimming is one of the most employed practices in the world to prevent feather and skin damage due to pecking behaviour of the hens. However, as part of the living tissue is removed, beak trimming causes pain and discomfort. On the other hand phasing out of this practice could lead to high mortality due to injurious pecking if insufficient measures are taken to prevent injurious pecking.

Solution

Management problems should be identified, and best practices adapted to their context should be progressively applied. In the meantime, if beak trimming is chosen, ensure that it is done at the hatchery with IR equipment, properly set to reduce discomfort to a minimum.

Benefits

Although the application of beak trimming causes discomfort and pain to the chicks, it may prevent skin lesions of other birds, even leading to increased mortality, later in life. Proper beak trimming will restrict pain and discomfort to a minimum.

Practical recommendations

- As beak trimming is a painful measure, masking problems caused by insufficient housing and management, it may be an acceptable solution for the short time in situations where the risk for injurious pecking is still too large to omit beak trimming. For the long term, the aim should be to be able to keep laying hens with intact beaks without injurious pecking problems.
- The earlier beaks are trimmed, the less abnormalities they will develop. Trimming before 10 days of age most likely will not cause permanent pain.
- IR-treated chicks may have difficulty starting to drink when arriving at the rearing farm. A slightly higher environmental temperature and higher water pressure can help them through the first period.

APPLICABILITY BOX

Theme

Animal husbandry

Keywords

Beak trimming, infrared method, laying hens

Context

Transition to and operating cage-free housing systems for laying hens

Not allowed for organic flocks

Application time

Application at the hatchery

Period of impact

Direct pain is caused, but if applied correctly, no lasting discomfort

Equipment

Infrared beak trimming carousel

Best in

Barn and free-range systems for laying hens

Target audience

Farmers, farm advisors



Picture 1: 15 weeks old pullet with IR-trimmed beak (Photo: WUR)

Picture 2: 15 weeks old pullet with intact beak (Photo: WUR)

On-farm application

Application of beak trimming

- If beak trimming is carried out, it should be done with the infrared method (IR) on newly hatched chicks at the hatchery.
- Thorough instructions for the personnel should be given as to how the machinery should be set. Variation in chick size should be limited to a minimum to prevent chicks from being treated too much or too little (thus: chicks from older and younger parent stock should not be mixed, preferably the machine should be adjusted to each batch of chicks).
- The application of IR should be just enough to remove the sharp tip but not removing too much of the tip. Removing more than half of the tip (measured from nostril to end of the tip) may cause permanent damage (formation of neuromas).

On-farm approach:

- Management of hens with intact beaks is requiring additional knowledge and skills as how to prevent injurious pecking behaviour. Therefore, one should be careful with eliminating beak trimming during the transition phase from cages to cage-free systems. Farmers are advised to first learn the skills of keeping hens in cage-free systems before taking the next step of keeping birds with intact beaks.

Further information

More information on beak trimming:

<https://www.poultryhub.org/all-about-poultry/health-management/beak-trimming>

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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