

Management hens with intact beaks

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. Injurious pecking behaviour can be induced by many factors, e.g. feed, climate, gut health, light, rearing conditions, transition from rearing to laying house. Preventing this behaviour comes down to finding a fine balance between all these factors and requires skills and experience in keeping hens in cage-free systems.

Solution

Management problems should be identified, and best practices adapted to their context should be progressively applied.

Benefits

A balanced set of management measures and continuous monitoring of the behaviour of the flock will prevent the onset of injurious pecking. This will ensure a good feather cover, low mortality and optimal production parameters.

Practical recommendations

- Don't save on the cost of well reared pullets! Feather pecking can already start in the rearing period. Most likely it will then continue during lay. Rearing flocks that are not performing feather pecking, have a high chance they will not do so during lay. Therefore a well reared flock will earn itself back.
- Well-reared pullets have had ample foraging material of good quality to direct their pecking behaviour to, possibly additional roughage and pecking stones, a good quality feed with as much as possible a constant composition, fresh climate and good health.
- Stress due to the transition from rearing to laying house should be minimized. This means management should be as similar as possible (e.g. same feeding times, same light schedule) and preferably the housing system should be very similar.
- In the laying period hens should be provided with roughage and pecking stones. Litter should be dry and friable, draft should be minimized as well as heat stress.
- Feed is one of the major factors influencing pecking behaviour. Feed should be of good quality and the composition should be as constant as possible. Each change of feed composition is a risk for the onset of injurious pecking.
- Pelleted feed should be prevented, as this will increase the risk for injurious pecking behaviour. Meal or crumbs are preferred feed forms. Selective eating and de-mixing of the feed should be prevented, as this will result in a nutritional imbalance in the chickens, leading to an increased risk for outbreaks

APPLICABILITY BOX

Theme

Animal husbandry

Keywords

Intact beaks, management, laying hens

Context

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

Application time

Both during rearing and laying period

Period of impact

Mainly during the laying period

Equipment

Foraging material, good food, climate control

Best in

Barn and free-range systems for laying hens

Target audience

Farmers, farm advisors

of injurious pecking. Make sure the feeder is emptied by the birds once a day. Setting two feeding times close to each other will allow all birds to eat (the first time the strong birds eat, the second time the weaker birds).

- At the start of lay, frequent flock walks should be made to collect mislaid eggs. Hens tend to lay eggs where there already is an egg, and outside the nest boxes there is more chance for egg-laying birds to be pecked at the cloaca, there is more chance for cloaca pecking and cannibalism to develop in flocks with higher percentages of mislaid eggs.
- Light should be evenly distributed throughout the house, with the resting areas being slightly dimmer and the foraging areas being slightly brighter. Direct sunbeams should be avoided as these may cause smothering or feather pecking.
- Parasites may induce pecking behaviour, so maintain a high hygiene standard and take measures to keep parasite infestations low.
- Listen during your daily flock walk to the noise of the birds. Calm sounds are OK, but hard squeaks may be an indication of birds being pecked.

On-farm application

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.
- Often light intensities are reduced to prevent injurious pecking. However, this will make birds more fearful, which can lead to increased pecking behaviour. Reduction of light or applying red light should be seen as last resort if no other measures seem to work against injurious pecking.
- Regular flock walks to check on (feather) condition of the birds is recommended. For this more information see Practice abstract on *Practical health and welfare assessment protocol for pullets and laying hens in cage-free systems*.

Further information

More information on how to keep laying hens with intact beaks can be obtained from various websites:

- <http://www.assurewel.org/layinghens.html>
- <https://www.featherwel.org/featherwel/>

About this practice abstract and Best Practice Hens

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Wageningen Livestock Research (WLR)

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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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