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Common ailments of pet hens

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ABSTRACT: Chickens are now the sixth most popular pet, and rehomed commercial hens are the ideal starter hen for first-time hen keepers. They do, however, have their own specific issues, and sometimes knowing what is normal can help to establish the severity of a presenting condition. This article discusses the common conditions of pet hens and their treatment.

Sam Morgan writes ...

We are so used to seeing cats, dogs and rabbits in the practice however how about a chicken? With the increasing popularity of keeping chickens as pets, owners may start requiring our advice with regards to common ailments. The British Hen Welfare Trust has an advice line in place to help with such queries, however we hope this article will offer readers an overview to what you could expect.

Chickens are now the sixth most popular pet, and rehomed commercial hens (ex-battery hens or ex-bats as they are known) are the ideal starter hen for first-time hen keepers. Often described as cats and dogs with feathers, they make friendly and endearing pets. Ex-bats do, however, have their own specific issues, and sometimes knowing what is normal can help to establish the severity of a presenting condition. As there are now many more ex-bats kept as pets, most practices will be seeing them; this does not mean they are more prone to illness than other hens, only that they are more popular, with 50,000 being rehomed as pets every year by the British Hen Welfare Trust (BHWT).

The commercial hen

All commercial hens receive a raft of vaccinations through a spray-mist system in the first few days of life. This usually includes cover for:

- Marek's disease
- infectious bronchitis
- coccidiosis
- Gumboro disease
- Newcastle disease
- salmonellosis
- infectious avian rhinotracheitis

- infectious laryngotracheitis
- egg drop syndrome

Commercial hybrid laying hens are selectively bred to produce eggs rather than meat, and for this reason they carry very little breast muscle. Don't expect a recently rehomed ex-bat to look anything like the chicken you see on the supermarket shelf (although some do arrive with very little feather cover)!

The commercial broiler is bred to gain weight very quickly and is usually slaughtered between five and seven weeks of age. Commercial laying hens are classed as end-of-lay or *spent* at 18 months old and at this point are available for rehoming (although the vast majority are sent to slaughter). In reality, most hens will continue to lay happily, but egg frequency and eggshell quality may diminish. This selective breeding also means that ex-bats are used to popping out eggs with little fuss. It is fairly unusual for them to get fully formed eggs stuck, although some can have problems with soft-shell eggs or laying overly large ones. A laying hen will produce an egg once every 26 h. An X-ray of a hen's abdomen will normally show at least one making its way down. Remember not to jump to conclusions and assume it is stuck.

While most birds come out from farms in good health (there is no point in farmers keeping sick stock), lameness due to bruising sustained a day or so after collecting rehomed hens is not uncommon due to the de-population process.

Hens are prey animals and therefore hide signs of illness so as not to appear weak and vulnerable. Conversely, they have excellent powers of recovery and can often bounce back quickly with minimal intervention, although this is currently not a widely held view within the veterinary profession. Always give them a chance to prove this; for example, a prolapsed hen can on initial presentation appear a hopeless case, but with minimal intervention she can relatively easily be brought back to peak condition within days.

A to Z of common problems

Ascites

Ascites (also known as “water belly”) is caused by a build-up of fluid in the peritoneal cavities and is not to be confused with egg peritonitis seen in hens that are “blind layers” (see later). It is usually caused either by poor ventilation or respiratory disease; both problems put pressure on the heart leading to failure. Liver and kidney disease are also possible causes of ascites. This is less common with hens from the new, enriched cages and hens will often walk off a water belly with exercise given time. Do not assume it is a circulatory issue unless the comb is blue-tinged.

Bumblefoot

Hens are often presented looking like they are wearing carpet slippers. The feet swell due to bacterial infection, which can be caused by a puncture wound or perch injury that introduces infection (**Figure 1**). Current veterinary thought is that bumblefoot can be difficult to treat because the pus acts as a foreign body. However, hard pus may be surgically removed and we have witnessed some hens improve with simple exercise.

Crop conditions

The crop is the first part of the digestive system – an out-pouching of the oesophagus located by running your hand down the hen’s neck towards the chest. A normal full crop should be tangerine-sized and you should be able to feel food particles freely moving inside. Food is stored here for up to six hours, where it is softened and fermented. Digestion starts before



Figure 1. Bumblefoot infection

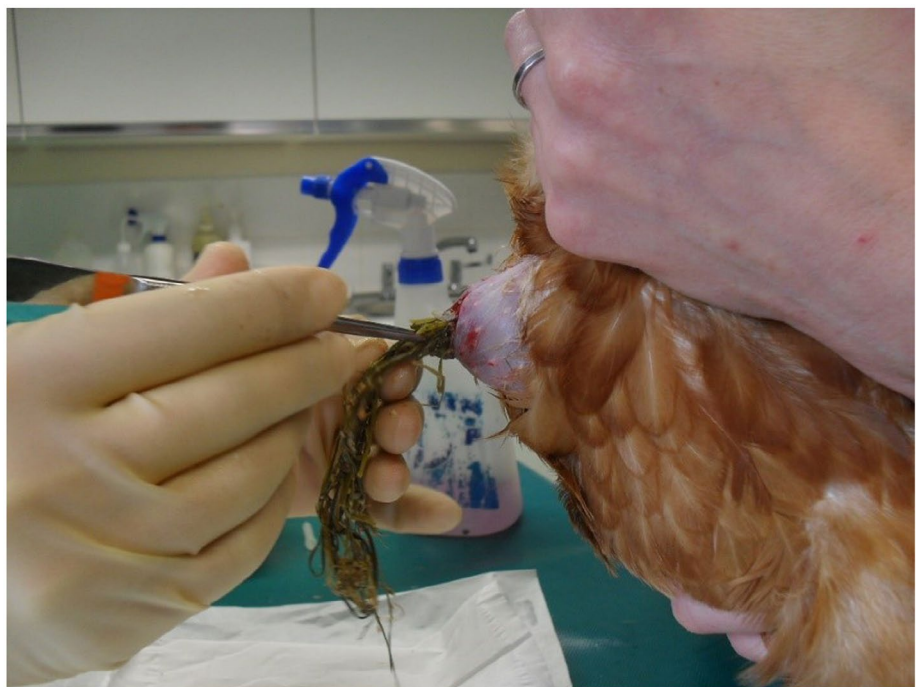


Figure 2. Surgical emptying of an impacted crop

the feed passes into the proventriculus (stomach).

The crop can become impacted with long fibrous grass, foreign objects and food. If this obstruction is not removed, the hen will slowly starve to death. Mild cases can be managed with massage and liquid paraffin, but surgery may be necessary (**Figure 2**).

Sour crop is caused by an overgrowth of *Candida albicans*, a yeast infection

which is an opportunistic pathogen – look for an underlying health issue. The crop fills with a characteristically foul-smelling fluid which often regurgitates when gentle pressure is put on the crop. Thorough washing out and instilling probiotics can be a successful treatment and/or the use of oral miconazole gel (Daktarin, Janssen Pharmaceutica). Nystatin has also proven effective, as have home remedies (such as a single dose of 3 ml of brandy) that concentrate on killing off the yeast.

Diarrhoea/droppings

Expect a laying hen to produce 100–150 g of droppings every day. Normal droppings should be well-formed and dark brown with a white urate cap. Most hens defaecate 12–16 times over a 24-h period. Additionally, a normal, healthy hen will produce a caecal dropping once or twice daily – this looks rather like caramel sauce and is completely normal.

Ears

Hens with ear infections may exhibit drunken or staggering behaviour. Often this is wrongly diagnosed as a neurological or stroke episode. Hens' ears are well-hidden under a flap of dense feathering just behind the eye. The ear canal should be a clean, dark hole with no debris.

Egg peritonitis

A hen presenting with a swollen, hard abdomen and a penguin-like stance is normally a "blind layer". In this condition, when the hen produces an egg, it leaves the ovary but misses the entrance to the infundibulum. Yolk builds up in the abdomen and creates a perfect culture medium for bacteria. If this only happens sporadically, the hen can reabsorb some of the yolk. Antibiotics will help to keep bacterial infection under control and prevent egg peritonitis, but the hen *must* be taken off lay. Advise a corn-only diet and consider a deslorelin hormone implant (Suprelorin, Virbac). This is unlicensed in this species, but has been effective in preventing ovulation on a temporary basis. While the current veterinary viewpoint is that blind layers present a poor prognosis, it is our view that birds can enjoy a good quality of life for years.

Endoparasites

The best known effective wormer for hens is flubendazole (Flubenvet, Elanco). It treats roundworms (ascarids), hairworms

(*Capillaria*) and gape worms (*Syngamus trachea*) (Figure 3), but is less effective against tapeworms (cestodes).

Ectoparasites

External parasites in hens can cause:

- anaemia (pale combs and wattles)
- listlessness, itching and restlessness
- weight loss
- reduced egg production

Parting the feathers around the vent area and checking under the wings will usually demonstrate the presence of *lice*. Flat, gold-grey, 1–3 mm long and fast-moving, these mites are easily treated with ivermectin.

Northern fowl mites are around 1 mm in size, grey, turning red when feeding, they are often confused with red mite although they cannot live longer than 10 days off the hen. The vent and tail areas are their favourite haunts. These mites can be treated with ivermectin.

Crusty white deposits at the base of feathers and feathers that fall out easily can be signs of *depluming mite*. This mite produces live young which burrow into the skin and cause irritation and oozing. Often the hens have a characteristic square shape to the feathers on their heads which produces an anxious appearance. Once seen, never forgotten! This mite is very difficult to treat although Fipronil has been found to be effective in some cases, but it is off licence for poultry.

Nutrition

Ex-bats are sometimes poorly feathered when they leave commercial farms. This is due to a combination of heat, environmental stress and occasional injurious pecking. To encourage rapid feather regrowth and also strong

eggshells it is vital that a suitable feed is given.

Hens should never be fed on kitchen scraps – it is illegal unless the household is vegan – and they are not waste disposal systems! A good-quality layer feed, with the correct levels of calcium and protein, will ensure the hens are not lacking anything in their diet. For this reason, a corn-only diet is not suitable long term (unless trying to take the hen off lay). The BHWT recommends the Allen & Page Smallholder range.

Prolapse

Older hens lay progressively bigger eggs and this can sometimes cause a prolapsed vent. Trying to push it back in is usually a waste of time. The hen should be isolated to prevent damage by other hens. The prolapse should be cleaned and a soothing cream, such as Dermisol, applied. The prolapse will usually shrink back if left alone. A corn-only diet should encourage her to lay smaller eggs.

Red mite

This is the scourge of all hen keepers. This mite lives in the environment and feeds from the hen at night. A major infestation can cause anaemia, loss of egg production and even death. The mites are grey and only just visible to the naked eye – they become red after a blood meal. Red mites can become resistant to many of the over-the-counter treatments available, and even strong parasiticides can become ineffective if used continuously. Regularly switching treatments from systemic products, such as Fipronil, to topical options such as diatomaceous earth can give the best results in managing red mite problems.

Scaly leg

Knemidocoptes mutans is a mite more usually seen on budgie faces. The mite burrows under the scales on the leg and causes irritation and the scales to lift. Treatment is simple: suffocate the mites with a thick layer of Vaseline® or Swarfega® massaged into the leg. Swarfega® is also a cleanser and will assist in the gentle removal of damaged scales, which will fall off in time, and new healthy scales will regrow.

Uropygial gland

The little lump at the base of the hen's tail is the uropygial gland. This is the hen's preen gland which produces oil to keep her feathers in tip-top condition.



Figure 3. Gape worms (*Syngamus trachea*) (photo courtesy of The Chicken Vet)



Figure 4. Vent gleet – classic sticky, white discharge

Vent gleet

A white, sticky, smelly discharge which sticks to vent feathering points towards a *Candida* infection (Figure 4). Before assuming it is a herpes virus, which is a commonly held viewpoint, remember that recently rehomed ex-bats will have

been living without a cockerel and the cause is more likely to be a yeast infection. Routine bathing of the vent area using Epsom salts solution followed by regular application of clotrimazole cream (Canesten, Bayer) will alleviate the worst of the symptoms. Apple cider

vinegar and probiotics should also be given by mouth.

Conclusion

We at the British Hen Welfare Trust handle 8000–9000 adoptions, rehoming more than 50,000 ex-bats each year; hens as pets are here to stay and we wholeheartedly appeal to the veterinary profession to pick up the mantle and learn more about the diagnosis and treatment of these delightful creatures.

Acknowledgements

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