

Common Chicken Illnesses

It is a rare chicken that will live its life and be entirely illness free, much the same as us or any other animal. If you are unfamiliar with keeping chickens, the first time one of your girls gets sick can be very stressful as the unknown seems enormous. This article aims to provide some basic information about some common chicken illnesses, along with treatment options and links to more detailed information. Suburban Chooks believes that it is useful to be aware of these diseases so you can draw on this knowledge if you need to. There is also some general information on other health issues that you need to be aware of... If you are just starting with chickens (you haven't had them before or haven't had them for a while) some of the information below may not be immediately relevant to you and your girls. However, it is still useful information to have and be aware of...

In the wild it became necessary for chickens to mask their illnesses, in order to avoid the chance of possibly becoming prey to animals that would target them and increase their chance of survival. As a result, domestic chickens are very resilient animals and by the time they are showing symptoms you will need to closely monitor them and intervene if their condition deteriorates.

The importance of quarantining new chickens

It is always a good idea to quarantine new chickens before adding them to your existing flock for a few different reasons. Firstly, this gives you a chance to worm and treat/prevent mites and lice if you don't know or suspect it wasn't done recently.

Secondly, a new chicken can get stressed with the change of location and travel and as a result this can bring out a dormant disease in a chicken that looked healthy when you first bought it. This is similar to how we may be fine and healthy, but stress from moving house can bring out a cold (or a cold sore, for those of us who are familiar with cold sores). Quarantining new chooks allows for them to recover or receive treatment in a less stressful environment and minimizes the risk of your old established flock getting sick from a strain of disease that they don't have any immunity to.

Should you choose not to quarantine your new chickens, because you don't have the room/facilities in your backyard or some other reason, you need to be aware that you are putting your new girls and your existing girls at risk of getting sick. Therefore you should be more vigilant for signs of disease/illness and be ready to treat them if necessary...

Mites and lice

Mites and lice are a common problem in poultry keeping and can be very persistent (read, difficult to eradicate). Both mites and lice are parasites which can live off the blood of the chicken, as well as live off the feathers or skin debris (depending on what type they are). It is not unusual to see a few lice on a chicken and chickens need to engage in the natural behavior of dust bathing to remove the lice and mites, as they are irritating to chickens.

A small number of lice is easily treated, but an outbreak of either lice or mites can cause significant health problems in your chickens if left untreated. Anemia is common with severe outbreaks and the resulting weakness leaves them susceptible to a range of other health issues.

The easiest and most cost effective way to treat lice and mites is with Pentene powder – available from Suburban Chooks or most other pet or food store.

Another recommended product is Coopex, a permethrin-based insecticidal spray, which can be sprayed in the chicken coop to prevent/kill mites and lice who may lay in wait in the coops. This product can also be used to spray chickens, instead of using Pentene powder and is very effective when treating an outbreak.

For more information on lice and mites, including the different types and photographs, see the Good Samaritan Centre on the [Backyard Poultry](#) website.

Worms and chickens

Chickens, like all animals, are susceptible to worms. There are a lot of different brands of chicken/poultry or bird worming solutions, which are available from Suburban Chooks, pet stores or wherever you buy your chicken food from. Follow the instructions on the label, and it's pretty hard to go wrong. Most are small amounts that are measured and added to clean drinking water. A lot of chickens are reluctant to drink this water so most owners withhold water overnight, and when letting the chickens out the next morning, will make the worming water available for the day.

The first dose will kill the hatched worms in your chicken but not the eggs. Therefore, you will also need to remember to give them a second dose 7-10 days after the first dose, to kill the new worm hatchlings which weren't around during the first dose.

After a while you might notice that the effectiveness of your wormer is reduced, so you might need to change the type of wormer used. You should also worm using a treatment which includes tapeworm once a year to keep your girls in good health.

The role of stress in chicken illnesses

Stress can trigger a dormant disease in a previously healthy chicken and unfortunately chickens can get stressed by a range of things including:

- * introducing it to a new environment (bring your new chook home)
- * introducing new chickens into your established flock, therefore causing stress to your existing chickens,
- * extreme and/or sudden changes in weather (heat waves, long periods of rain, storms)
- * frights from enthusiastic dogs/young children
- * attacks from foxes, feral cats, rats or birds of prey (crows, hawks etc).

Signs and symptoms of a sick chicken

Physical indications that a chicken may be sick include:

- *runny or blocked nose,
- * bubbly or swollen eye,
- * reduced activity (including not eating or drinking normally),
- * sitting hunched up (or fluffing up their feathers),
- * drooping tail,
- * sitting hunched up (or fluffing up their feathers),
- * changes in their fecal matter,
- * weakness or lethargy,
- * sneezing, gasping (as if having trouble getting enough air) or gurgling noise when breathing.

Chicken ‘colds’

Chickens are susceptible to getting colds, with symptoms including sneezing, nasal discharge, difficulty breathing (just like people) and swollen eyes. Most times the cause is mycoplasmal in origin (referred to as CRD or chronic respiratory disease) and is similar to a cold in humans. Dr. Colin Walker states on his [website](#) that “By far, the most common is CRD and in fact this probably accounts for more than 80% of all pet chickens presented with respiratory signs... Remember (as with many bird diseases) that there is a stress component so that, for control, not all of the answer will be the use of medication.”

Given that CRD is as it is named – chronic – it is a fact that birds affected by this may have recurrent bouts of symptoms throughout their life so you will have to monitor their health (as you do with any pets). In times of stress (molting, sick with another disease, and introduction of new flock members...) the carrier chickens can shed the bacteria and cause problems. This being said, it doesn’t mean that the carrier chickens are going to be constantly spreading the disease to every chicken in your flock, every day for the rest of their lives.

Good food, a clean environment and basic TLC can often be enough to support the chicken’s immune system to fight the virus on its own. If the chicken becomes very weak, opportunistic secondary bacterial infections can set in and will more than likely need antibiotic treatment, available from your local vet. But, if you can keep the stress levels down, introduce new flock members slowly (with a quarantine period) and boost their nutrition during molting, you will lessen the shedding of bacteria and the triggering of CRD in your flock.

Transference of illnesses

It is very common for a majority of chicken keepers to say that their chickens are disease free, but it is probably more accurate to say that they are stress and symptom free. As outlined in this article, there are a few common causes for illness and stress can trigger and/or amplify them.

If you have a closed flock (do not introduce new chickens until you replace the flock as a whole) and practice good animal husbandry it is entirely feasible that you will experience very little or no illness in your chickens. If you introduce new chickens you may find that you will contend with some sort of chicken illness – but who gave what to who can be a continuous issue.

To clarify this issue we will use the example of a chicken keeper who has three existing chickens in their flock and wants to introduce two new chickens without going through any quarantine procedure. Now, the established flocks (until the introduction of the new chickens) are a closed flock and we are assuming in good health. Any possible strains of disease (lets use CRD as the example) that they may have are dormant and is common to all of them.

The two new chickens were also healthy when purchased and showed no signs of illness. At the introduction of the new chickens, one of the new chickens (the new favorite) has gotten sick with CRD. Who made whom sick? There are two possible explanations for this having happened – the stress of the move triggered off a dormant CRD in that new chicken and it is now showing symptoms. Or was it a healthy chicken which has been subjected to a new strain of CRD that is within your flock and it has no immunity and therefore fallen ill as a result of this exposure.

Either path of transmission is entirely likely or you will not know which way the transmission occurred (i.e. who made whom sick). To minimize the risks involved in any transference of illness or disease, it is good practice to quarantine new chickens before introducing them to your existing flock.

Initial treatment for a sick chicken

If your chicken exhibits any combination of the above symptoms and you are concerned and wanting to treat the bird, you can start by remove the bird from the others and provide it with a clean, dry nesting material away from cold, wet and draughts with access to food and water – a cardboard box with a towel over the top in the laundry is a common ‘hospital wing’. If your chicken is really cold and listless, I encourage giving them a warmth boost by popping them close to a heater or putting a heat pack (in a plastic bag to protect from possible poo accidents) in with them – a sick chicken can use up to 60% of its energy trying to keep warm. Therefore, a warm environment is essential to helping a sick chicken recover, as it can then use its energy to fight the cause of illness (whatever that may be) instead of expending that energy by trying to keep warm.

If your chicken isn’t eating well and you are concerned, try to tempt them into eating anything. Porridge with honey, bread soaked in milk and honey/mollasses, moistened grain mix with honey/mollasses, anything really. The name of the game here is to give them energy/calorie dense foods to make up for their weakness. If they eat, again the energy will be used for fighting the illness and having their movement restricted will help. If you are very keen and willing, there is a particular food combination referred to as the Ricketts Diet which may be more tempting for a sick chicken and give them an energy boost. The ‘recipe’ for the Ricketts Diets and further information and/or support for you when you want to treat your sick chicken can be found at the Good Samaritan Centre on the [Backyard Poultry](#) website.

If you are particularly concerned and willing to do so, feel free to consult a specialist avian vet for assistance. They will always discuss treatment options and the costs involved, enabling you to make an educated decision about what to do when your beloved pet is ill.

Coccidiosis and young chickens

If your chicken is sick and miserable, not active/eating/drinking, has blood in their poo and exhibits other symptoms as listed here it is often safe to assume they have coccidiosis – a disease which attacks the intestinal tissues of chickens. Young birds with no built up immunity to the coccidiosis ‘bugs’ are at most risk and, left untreated, can die. Adult birds can also succumb to this disease. But as stated, this is a treatable disease with medication which are readily available, although you may need to search a bit to locate them.

If one of your chickens has coccidiosis it is safe to assume that the others may also have it, albeit to a lesser extent. It is fine to treat them all with a coccidiocidal medication. For more detailed information on coccidiosis, click [here](#).

Suburban Chooks Health Guarantee

Suburban Chooks offers all customers who purchase a chicken from us a one week health guarantee. Should your chicken get sick (or die – very unfortunate but does happen) within one week following taking your new birds home we will replace or refund the purchase cost of your chicken (dependant on availability). For more information on our Health Guarantee policy and your rights and responsibilities in buying a new chicken from us, please see our Terms and Conditions here.

Sudden death in Chickens

Unfortunately there are some 25 – 30 diseases which can cause the death of your beloved pet, including cancers, heart attacks etc. Although it can be very distressing to loose a chicken which was healthy yesterday, the only way to really be sure of what the cause of death was is to bring the fresh body to your specialist avian vet to perform an autopsy. Last time we did this, the total cost for some basic testing and autopsy was around \$160.

Further information?

It is always an option to contact us with your issue/concern and we will try to help you as best we can. Other than us, far and away the best source of information that I regularly recommend to customers, not only for chicken illness but anything chicken related, is the [Backyard Poultry](#) – Info Centre. For health related issues, please see the sub-forum called the ‘Good Samaritan Centre’. If you are unable to access some information or see relevant photos, please register to be a member (top of the page).

And as always, if you are really concerned and willing to do so, a specialist avian vet is the best avenue for treatment and advice for your sick chicken.