

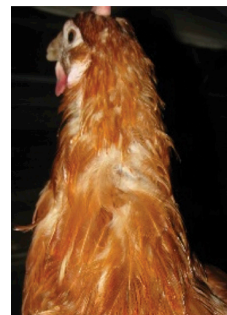
# Injurious pecking in laying hens



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## WHAT IS INJURIOUS PECKING?

Injurious pecking (IP) is behaviour such as gentle or severe feather pecking, vent pecking and cannibalistic pecking which can cause physical damage to another bird. These stressful, painful behaviours can lead to more deaths, make hens more susceptible to disease, make it more difficult for hens to manage their body temperature and reduce the number of eggs they lay.



## WHY DO HENS DO THIS?

The type of diet, breed, light levels, stress, floor type and stocking density can cause this behaviour. Hens need to perform instinctive foraging behaviour such as scratching and searching for food so when this behaviour is prevented they can increasingly resort to injurious pecking (IP).

## WHAT CAN BE DONE TO REDUCE OR ELIMINATE IT?



**Beak trimming** up to 10 day old chicks is currently permissible, though under review. In the organic sector, beak trimming is not allowed but flocks are much smaller and stocked at lower stocking densities; factors that can make feather pecking more manageable.

**Access to a range** gives hens the ability to forage and experience different environments, increasing stimulation through preening, resting in the sheltered areas and dust bathing in the more open areas. Where more tree cover is present on a range, plumage damage in the flock is reduced compared to flocks with less tree cover.

**Housing** should always be well designed -

- **Perches** reduce IP by giving victim birds an area to escape, as long as perches are above head height.
- **Dark brooders** are useful to allow chicks to mimic resting under the mother's plumage creating conditions that have been shown to improve the feather cover of flocks
- **Floor type** - raising hens on wire can lead to poor plumage due to a lack of stimulus for foraging or dust-bathing
- **Access to straw** gives a deeper litter and encourages exploratory behaviours



**Diets** high in **protein** and specifically amino acids, such as methionine, cysteine and lysine, are important for reducing IP. **Insoluble fibres** can be used to dilute energy in the diet, which increases the time spent feeding, as well as gut motility and subsequently, can reduce IP. The number of times a diet is changed should be minimised and completed gradually with extra enrichments provided to minimise stress.

**Stress** due to the transfer from rearing to laying should also be minimised. If birds are not reared on the same farm that they will lay on, rearers and producers should communicate to reduce the number of changes between the systems which in turn can help to reduce the development of problem behaviour.

Strategies to reduce IP in flocks call for co-operation between advisors, industry, vets, academics and most importantly, the producers themselves. The **FeatherWel** project, led by the University of Bristol, has produced a *guide for laying hen farmers for improving feather cover*, which gives advice on easy to implement management strategies to reduce IP in your flock. **For more information on this topic please read the Technical Article by Dr Ruth Wonfor and look out for poultry events through Farming Connect.**