

Signs of Illness in Poultry

Is that bird sick or lame?

With the adoption of new SPCA Certified requirements for assessing lameness in poultry, it is important to know how to distinguish between signs of lameness and other kinds of illness in a flock.

For this reason, it is important to know the common signs of illness so that sick birds are not mistakenly identified as having leg problems.

For example, a bird that is sick with ascites or enteritis may appear to have a poor gait score (i.e. a score of 4 or 5) because of other symptoms that reduce its activity. Any birds that show signs of sickness should also be euthanized and should be noted in the mortality log along with the reason for culling.

In addition, barn temperature needs to be taken into account to rule out any symptoms caused by heat or cold stress.

Please keep the following common symptoms into account when observing a flock to help you differentiate between sick and lame birds:

Lame Birds:

- Are aware of their surroundings and will be alert and responsive (unless they have been severely lame for so long as to become emaciated)
- Attempt to move when disturbed (unless emaciated)
- Show interest in food and water (depending on the degree of lameness – a severely lame bird will often be found near a food/water source)
- Plumage will be close to their body (unless the barn is too cold, in which case feathers may be ruffled and birds may be huddled together)

Examples:



All three birds are of normal body weight/condition and are aware of their environment; however the first two birds are both shifting their body weight to one side to minimize pain on the other. The first bird has a source of lameness on the left leg (shifting weight to the right), while the second bird has a source of lameness on the right leg (shifting weight to the left). The third bird is showing the classic “wing-walking” technique that helps a bird that is severely lame shuffle around to a food or water source. Birds should be culled if they are found “wing-walking” as they will quickly become emaciated.

Sick Birds:

- Have dirty, unkempt feathers as they do not preen themselves
- Have ruffled feathers, despite the barn temperature being within a comfortable range¹
- Show little interest in or awareness of their environment
- Are usually found lying down or in a crouched/huddled position, with eyes closed
 - Not likely to be near a food or water source
 - Not interacting with the rest of the flock
 - Unwilling to move when disturbed
- Eat and drink less
 - Bird will be thin compared to the rest of the flock
 - If the birds are heat stressed, there will be a reduction in feed intake, but an increase in water consumption. Wet droppings may result.
- May show the following symptoms, depending on the illness:
 - Unusual breathing sounds (e.g. raspiness)
 - Panting (unless the barn is hot and many birds are seen panting, in which case heat exhaustion is more likely the cause)
 - Gaspings for air
 - Head shaking
 - Discharge from eyes or nostrils

Examples:



Bird is lying down in a huddled position, not near food and water and has limited interest in its environment



Bird on left hand side is standing, but head is close to body, feathers are ruffled and has limited interest in the environment unlike the others birds around it

¹ Barn temperatures at placement should be between 30 to 32°C. The temperature can then be lowered by 2 to 3°C each week until the barn temperature is 21 to 23°C at six weeks of age. Beyond six weeks of age, the barn temperature should be between 20 and 25°C. The barn temperatures should be measured at the birds eye level