

SWOLLEN ABDOMEN IN POULTRY

Symptoms: waddling like a duck, wide leg stance, underbelly puffy and filled with fluid or enlarged and hard, diarrhoea (white, green), mucky vent, no eggs, standing around looking miserable with her tail lowered, purple tinged comb.

Ascites (fluid pooling in the abdomen) and peritonitis (inflammation of the peritoneal tissue) can be caused by a number of things, most often by yolks missing the "funnel" or infundibulum, after being ovulated from the ovary, and falling directly from her ovary into her abdomen. Other types of infections and sometimes cancer can also cause peritonitis. There are also two types of peritonitis - sterile and septic.

Sterile Peritonitis

If your hen has sterile peritonitis, it means that although her abdomen is filled with fluid, the fluid is not filled with bacteria and is not caused by an internal infection. With this type of peritonitis, the best thing to do is leave the hen alone. If she is extremely uncomfortable and having a hard time breathing, you can ask your vet to try draining off some of the fluid to relieve pressure - however if you introduce bacteria into her abdomen, she will get a nasty infection and the peritonitis will turn septic - then she will likely die.

With sterile peritonitis, the hen will have trouble getting around and will have some loss of appetite, but she will continue to eat and will improve gradually over time - potentially she will recover totally or she will always have fluid build-up. I have a hen with sterile peritonitis and she has been this way for over 3 years now. She has a harder time breathing as the fluid has put pressure on her airsacs and lungs (this is especially evident when she lays down at night) but she is still hanging in there. When she stops ovulating for the year, usually in winter, the fluid is reabsorbed into her body and she is totally normal.

Septic Peritonitis

The other type of peritonitis is septic peritonitis- the fluid gets bacteria growing in it and then there isn't much you can do for her as the infection is so wide-spread and huge that usually even massive doses of strong antibiotic aren't enough. In that case, you can tell that your hen has this type because they go downhill rapidly and lose their appetite. Often they have a fever (hot comb - very hot under wings). You can ask your vet to try to drain them- this definitely offers them some relief- it takes the pressure off their organs. If the source of the infection is still there though, they fill back up before long.

If your hen is showing the symptoms above, she will require attention from a vet. She will become very uncomfortable and be in pain as her internal organs are compressed by the fluid.