

FEATHER PECKING



A relatively common problem with hens kept in any type of confined enclosure (however large). It is largely thought it stems from boredom and then develops into a habit. In their natural environment hens will spend all day foraging for food so will keep busy. It is not associated with any type of aggression and can start with hens at any level in the pecking order. It is usually easy to spot the hen doing the feather pecking as she will be the only hen with a full set of feathers.

POSSIBLE CAUSES	CAUSES	TREATMENTS TO TRY
Boredom	Run too small. Not enough stimulation or things to do.	Give your hens more space. Put a thick base in the run such as wood-chips. This serves a dual purpose of giving them something to scratch in and giving them exercise. Hang up cabbages, lettuces, bunches of nettles etc. just above head height so they have to work for their food. Try feeding dry layers mash instead of pellets - it will take them longer to eat.
Frustration	If you sometimes let your hens out to free range but at other times keep them in the run, they will become frustrated when they are kept in.	A tricky one if they have already been let out as they will have tasted freedom - what you've never had you never miss! Consider letting them out to free range all the time if at all possible. If you are concerned about predator risk you could consider an electric fence.
Moulting or injury	When the hens see the new quills coming through the skin it is very tempting to pull them out which then develops into a habit. Any injury where blood is drawn or the skin looks different will encourage the hens to start pecking.	Consider fitting a poultry saddle if it will cover the damaged area. Leave on until the feathers have regrown beneath. Spray any damaged skin with Gentian Violet or a purple spray. Isolate and hens with broken skin until it has healed.
Lack of protein in the diet.	It is sometimes thought that a lack of protein can trigger feather pecking. As feathers are made up mostly of protein hens will self medicate by eating them.	Increase the hens protein levels slightly. Ensure their staple diet is still layers ration but try adding small amounts of mealworms or a chick ration that is higher in protein.
Established habit		If your hens feather pecking habit is already established and the tips above have not worked, you could try fitting a beak bit. It sits in the hens beak and clips into the nostrils. It works by stopping the ends of the beak meeting and being able to get a grip on the feathers. It can only be left on for a few months as after this the beak will curve around the bit and start to meet again at the tip. There are two types - a simple 'c' shaped beak bit (pictured above) or a larger 'bumpa bit' (below). Fit them using a pair of circlip pliers and ensure the clips fit against the hens septum and don't pinch the skin on the nostrils.

