



Top to toe health check

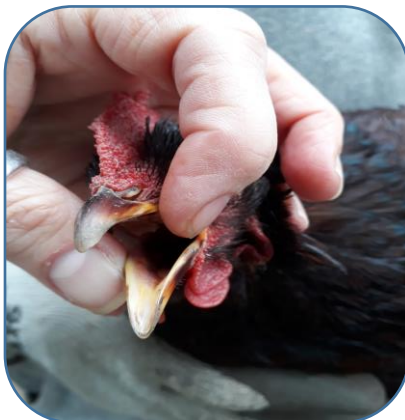
Check your birds' health

So why is it so important to check your flock regularly? I get asked this all the time, and it's all about 'familiarity'; I walk the flock each morning when I let them out – move amongst them, watch how they move and check that they are all alert and feeding. You get to know quickly what is normal for each bird, and what isn't; that way you will spot any injuries or illness and deal with it quickly.

Then there's the actual hands-on health check, where you can check the weight and feel of each bird. Most of mine are easy to handle, but a couple of them don't much enjoy it, so I tend to do my examinations about half an hour after they've gone to roost, when they are all mellow and more relaxed – doing this once a month is fine, every couple of weeks is brilliant. One of those headlight torches is a wonderful thing! It's also good to be happy handling chickens so that you feel confident enough to do a health check on any new birds **before** you buy them.



Hold your chicken firmly and get an idea if you think she may have gained or lost weight – no need to weigh each bird, just an idea is fine. Start at the top and check both eyes are bright, no bubbles or partially closed eyes. Look at the nostrils at the top of the beak – both should be clear, no snot or bubbles. Open the beak gently and check inside – the mouth should be clear and no white deposits caused by canker.



Moving down the body, there's the crop on the right hand side of the chest; this should be full in the evening and empty in the morning, you will usually feel a bit of feed in there.

If you are buying point of lay pullets, then they will have soft feathers and you will be able to feel new ones growing through underneath their plumage – they go through 5 changes of 'clothes' before getting their adult

'wardrobe'. Do not buy a bird with bald patches, signs of pecking or any obvious injuries – I know it sounds like common sense, but you'd be surprised how many folks buy a poorly or injured bird because they 'feel sorry for it'.

Looking at the legs, you should find that a young bird has closely scaled, smooth legs, warm to the touch and no obvious injuries to the legs or palms under the foot. An older bird will have much coarser scales.

Now down to the business end... tuck her head under your arm and get her tail up in the air, you will see a lot of fluff under her tail. Press the flats of your fingers against the fluff under her tail and you will be able to feel two pointy bones sticking out – these are her pelvic bones or pin bones. If they are about 2cm apart, she is still young and not yet ready to lay; about 4 -5cm gap and she is probably already in lay or about to start. Just above these bones you will see her vent deep in the fluff – it may be pulsing, this is normal. A small dry vent about 1cm across indicates that she is about a month away from laying eggs. A moist vent about 3-4cm across means that she's mature and ready to lay.

Part all the fluff and check around the vent, right down to the skin to see if there are any lice or mites scurrying around at the base of the feathers. You are looking to have a healthy hen with no parasites and a nice clean vent.



Take a look at [this video](#) which I filmed for Nettex Poultry