

Coccidiosis – Be Prepared

I hope this will help you be prepared before this disease strikes your hatch.

This is a very infectious disease which is most likely to affect chicks aged between 10 days and 8 weeks old but not always. After this age the chicks have usually acquired a degree of resistance to it, except if severely challenged.

Most chick starter crumbs should already contain an Anti-coccidiostat or "ACS" Some people try to rely on that to prevent an outbreak and allow hygiene to lapse thinking they are safe. Don't make that mistake. A severe or even sometimes a not so severe challenge will march straight through those defenses.

Always be on the lookout for Coccidiosis when the weather is warm and humid as it thrives in these conditions and can strike very quickly and spread very fast. Unless you are vigilant in your hygiene the first signs you may well find are dead chicks. At other times of the year you will still get attacks of course, but in my experience the severest type always seem to occur during warm, humid weather.

Infected chicks will usually look listless, standing around with ruffled feathers, they frequently don't want to eat, their eyes are often closed and they lose weight. The usual thing that books will tell you to look out for is blood in the droppings. This is by no means always present. Some forms of it do not produce blood in droppings. If blood is present then you can assume the disease has already got a good foothold and any delays in treatment will mean losing birds.

The disease is caused by an unpleasant little protozoa called a coccidia. Coccidia are host specific, so there is no risk that a Coccidiosis attack in turkeys will spread to your chickens or visa versa. The stage where the disease is passed between birds is called an oocyst. These get passed in the droppings. They are tough little blighters and can survive over a year outside the body, and are not killed by normal disinfectants. There are many types of Coccidiosis that can affect your birds some are severe whilst others are relatively harmless. If your birds are ill we can assume of course, that your birds haven't picked up a harmless type!

The usual treatments are a very effective group of drugs called Sulphonamides which are administered in the water. These should be available from your vet or in our case on the APA-ABA Youth Program website as well as your favorite supplier. Do NOT be tempted to give more than the stated dose or you could end up doing more harm than good. Try to ensure each affected chick has drunk some of the dosed water. But remember to treat the entire batch of chicks as even the healthy looking ones are likely to already be infected. Sometimes when the chick is completely listless and won't drink you might have to put a few drops in its mouth with an eye dropper or syringe. Be sure not to force it down or you might inadvertently force it into the lungs.

During an outbreak the chicks MUST be kept clean and dry so as not to keep re-infecting themselves by contact with the wet droppings. If keeping them on shavings these should be changed at least every 24 hours, preferably every 12 hours. If bloody droppings are present change the litter as often as you can to prevent the chicks ingesting the oocysts. Another good way is to get the chicks onto a wire floor so the droppings fall through and away from the birds.

Dryness of litter is vital. Coccidiosis thrives in the warm damp conditions which are readily created if chicks are under heat lamps with spilled water.

Notes: A few years ago I had a strange outbreak of illness amongst over-year birds, mostly males. This occurred after a warm humid spell of weather. It didn't spread fast, just affecting a few birds every couple of weeks. Because of the age of the birds I had discounted Coccidiosis. The symptoms were a weakness when walking with a trembling gait, intense hunger, and a severe loss of weight. From the symptoms I had been preparing myself to deal with an outbreak of Avian TB and fearing the worst I sent a bird off for a post mortem. The results, to my surprise showed it was just another form of Coccidiosis. There was no blood in the droppings and the symptoms were not like I would have expected, but treatment for coccidiosis proved totally effective and recovery was swift.

Although Coccidiosis is usually thought of as a chick disease do not discount it on age grounds alone!