

I have a flock of backyard chickens that are having problems. I recently introduced a new bird to the flock and soon after the egg production dropped, they have gone off their feed and their feathers are messed up. When I looked at the birds I saw lots of dark specks running around on their skin. What is the problem with them and how do I fix it so they start laying eggs again?

It sounds like your hens may have encountered a parasite problem. Those “fast-moving specks” might very well be mites. These external parasites suck the blood of their host and are common in poultry. Affected birds will often lose their appetite, look scruffy and have a drop in their egg production due to anemia from blood loss. Mites can also make the chickens more susceptible to other diseases. Your local avian veterinarian can confirm this diagnosis by examining those “specks” under a microscope as well as examining your birds for other health problems.

The key to treatment involves treating both the birds and their environment at the same time. The parasites will attack the birds to feed but often are found hiding in cool, dark areas of the hen house or in the bedding. After removing any bedding and eggs, dust both the birds and the ground with a poultry-safe insecticide powder such as ‘Sevin’ which contains 5% Carbaryl. It is important to follow the directions on the label when using insecticide powders for your safety and that of your birds. At the same time scrub all surfaces of the hen house with hot soapy water followed by a dilute 1:10 bleach solution (9 parts water to one part full-strength bleach) to eliminate the mites and their eggs. Let in as much sunlight in as you can while cleaning as this will also help kill the parasites. Replace all bedding material each time you clean. Allow the hen house to air out between applications. Since the life cycle of the parasites takes a week, you will probably need to do several weekly treatments to eradicate the pests. Don’t forget that you should not eat any eggs for a week after treating the chickens with insecticide.

Please note that you can also use an organic parasite control, diatomaceous earth, to reduce future mite problems in your chicken yard. These products are available from your farm/feed store or by consulting your agricultural extension agent. Follow the instructions on the labels for all products. Finally, your local avian veterinarian can be a very helpful source of advice for the proper husbandry of your chickens.

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