



Why My Hens Stopped Laying

This is a common concern among small flock owners as there are many things which can cause hens to stop laying eggs. The most common causes are decreasing daylength, disease problems, advancing age, improper nutrition, and stress.

Molting is a natural process whereby a bird renews its feathers. In chickens it is often associated with a seasonal pause in egg laying; however, a molt can occur any time if a hen encounters severe stress. A rapid feather loss by the entire flock is usually a sign that something serious has happened (*e.g.*, lack of water or severe chilling).

Decreasing daylength occurs naturally between June 22 and December 22. This change frequently causes hens to molt and stop laying for about two months when they receive only natural light. To prevent this, provide artificial light to maintain a constant daylength of at least 16 hours per day. For small flocks it is usually most practical to provide continuous light. One 40-watt light globe mounted 6 to 8 feet above the floor in the center of the pen will provide adequate light for pens up to 15' x 15'. The light can be turned off during the daylight but if you forget to turn it on, even once, hens may start to molt and stop laying. If you want to turn the light off during daylight, a time clock is recommended. Morning and evening lights (4 a.m. to 8 p.m., PST) are recommended with a slight overlapping of artificial and natural light in the morning and evening.

Disease problems can occur under the best of conditions. Often the first sign is a drop in egg production. Other symptoms you might see include molting, dull and listless appearance, coughing, lameness, and death. You can't tell what the problem is just by looking at the flock. Even skilled poultry veterinarians must make a careful post-mortem examination to accurately diagnose poultry disease problems. Remember that a few losses must be expected; if you see one sick bird, isolate or sacrifice it and watch the rest of the flock carefully. If other birds show similar symptoms, it is advisable to seek help from a veterinarian.

Your best protection against disease is to buy healthy chickens and keep them isolated from other birds. Buying chickens at local auctions is asking for trouble. If you want to increase your flock, buy chicks from a reputable hatchery or allow some of your hens to set and hatch a brood.

Division of Agricultural Sciences
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

LEAFLET
21018

Advancing age will affect all hens sometime. This varies a great deal between individuals. In general, hens lay best during their first year, but outstanding individuals may lay quite well for 2 or 3 years. This will usually be interrupted by annual molts and sometimes even two molts a year for the older hens. The removal of non-layers is recommended if economical egg production is your goal.

Improper nutrition can occasionally cause hens to stop laying. The most common problem is failing to give hens water. Hens without water for only a few hours may stop laying for days or even weeks. A shortage of energy, protein or calcium can also cause a production slump. Commercial egg mashes usually contain everything your hens need if given as the entire diet. If they are limited or supplemented with grains, then calcium (*i.e.*, oyster shell) should be given free choice.

Avoid feeding medicated starting or growing feeds (starter, grower pellets, etc.) to laying hens. The drugs in these may result in residues in eggs, abnormal eggs, or other problems.

Stresses such as moving, handling, chilling, overheating, debeaking, or fright can contribute to or be the sole cause of egg production slumps. The most common winter stress is chilling. Be sure chickens have protection from wind and rain during the winter months but don't close them in so much that excessive ammonia builds up in the air. When a distinct ammonia odor is present, it is time to increase the air openings in your house. If wet litter develops, clean it out as soon as possible to avoid diseases and stress.

Recommended References

Keep Your Flock Healthy, Leaflet 2902
Common Poultry Diseases, Leaflet 2954
Feeding Chickens, Leaflet 2919
Chickens for Home Use, Leaflet 2894
Starting and Managing Small Poultry Units, Leaflet 2656

*The authors are Ralph Ernst, Extension Poultry Specialist,
and Gary Beall, Communications Specialist, U.C., Davis.*

The University of California Cooperative Extension in compliance with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 does not discriminate on the basis of race, creed, religion, color, national origin, sex, or mental or physical handicap in any of its programs or activities. Inquiries regarding this policy may be directed to: Affirmative Action Officer, Cooperative Extension, 317 University Hall, University of California, Berkeley, California 94720, (415) 642-0903.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture, James B. Kendrick, Jr., Director, Cooperative Extension, University of California.