

Care of Beak, Nails, and Spurs in Backyard/Fancy Poultry

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The beak, nails, and spurs of the chicken are highly keratinized structures. If kept outside, the bird may have the opportunity to keep these structures worn down through the activities of scratching and pecking. If the bird is caged or kept on deep litter, these structures may become overgrown. The spurs will continue to grow throughout the bird's life and can become very long or even ingrown. This can cause the bird problems when walking and can also lead to infection.

If structures become overgrown, they must be attended to. Birds may have trouble eating if their beaks are overgrown. Overgrown nails will become crooked and detract from the bird's appearance. In addition to the problems mentioned above, overgrown spurs on a cock can injure the hen during mating and can also injure handlers.

Overgrown structures can be trimmed and shaped. They are made of keratin - just like human nails. To trim these structures on your birds, you will need:

Dog nail clippers (for spurs and nails) Fingernail clippers (for beaks) Cautery blade or pocket knife and heat source

The use of an electrical cautery blade may be impractical. If so, use the blade of a pocket knife heated for several minutes over a stove top or can of liquid heat. Follow safety precautions if using an open flame.

Beak - have one person hold the bird securely while a second person carefully clips away the overgrown portions. Have in your mind the shape of a normal beak. Note the position of the tongue and be very careful not to cut it. Remove small portions of the beak at a time and shape it so it looks natural. In the event that you remove too much and hit the area with blood vessels, apply the hot knife blade. You only need to apply the blade for a second to cauterize the area. You only need to stop the bleeding, you want to burn as little tissue as possible.

Nails - a one-person procedure. For a right-handed person, hold the bird with your left hand and the dog nail clippers with your right. You will be able to see where the vascularized area ("the quick") ends. Do not cut back of the quick. If bleeding occurs, apply the hot blade.

Spurs - have one person hold the bird, while a second person slips the dog nail clippers over the spur. If the spur is severely overgrown, rotate the clipper back and forth to loosen the outer sheaths. Once this is done, cut through the spur. Remove a 1/4 inch at a time. A hot blade can be used to stop any bleeding.