



Protecting Backyard Chickens from Disease

Small-flock owners can follow easy guidelines to help ensure the health of their birds.

“People should buy chicks from outlets like feed and seed stores or directly from a mail-order company,” said Dr. Joe Hess, an Alabama Cooperative Extension System poultry scientist.

“These outlets sell chicks from suppliers that are certified disease free, helping ensure that people begin their flocks with healthy chicks. Always buy birds from a reputable source.”

Hess added that backyard biosecurity helps safeguard flocks. “Good hygiene and common-sense practices help prevent disease.”

Keep Your Distance. Other people and birds—including new birds you’ve just bought and wild birds—can carry diseases. Limit visitor contact with your birds.

If visitors own birds, do not let them enter your bird area or have access to your birds. Avoid visiting farms or other households with poultry.

Place feeders in covered locations where wild birds cannot gain access. This reduces the potential for diseases carried in wild bird droppings.

Keep It Clean. “People can pick up germs on shoes and clothing,” said Hess. Reduce the potential for exposing birds to disease by keeping a set of clothes and shoes to wear only around your birds.

Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water before entering the coop or handling birds. Then wash hands again after handling birds.

Keep Cages Clean. Change food and water daily. Clean and disinfect equipment that comes in contact with birds or droppings.

Don’t Bring Home Disease. Tires, poultry cages, and equipment can harbor germs. If you travel to a place where birds are present, clean and disinfect these items before returning home.

“If you take birds to a fair or exhibition, keep those birds separated from your flock for at least two weeks after the event. Keep new birds separate from your flock for a month.”

Know Poultry Disease Warning Signs. Poultry diseases can be swift moving and deadly. Early detection is important. “Check how birds are eating, their energy levels, and how they look daily,” said Hess.

What to Look For

- Sudden drop in egg production or misshapen eggs
- Swelling of head, eyelids, combs, and hocks
- Diarrhea
- Purplish discoloration of combs and wattles
- Difficulty breathing and nasal discharge
- Tremors, drooping wings, or other movement problems

Report Sick Birds. Hess reminds backyard flock owners that it is critical to report sick poultry. “State officials need to know if small flocks are having disease outbreaks to prevent spread to other small flocks or to commercial operations.”

Report sick poultry or suspicious deaths to the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries at (334) 240-7255.

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