

Foraging and Feather Pecking in Laying Hens

Gentle feather pecking by poultry is a normal component of their social behaviour. However, feather pecking by modern laying hens sometimes escalates. Birds plucking feathers from their cage mates leads to feather loss. It may reduce overall production efficiency and cause pain and injury and may lead to cannibalism and death.

Pecking is a very fixed component of poultry behaviour. Red Jungle Fowl, the ancestors of modern laying hens, evolved spending a large proportion of their time pecking at the ground, foraging for food. By comparison, the modern laying hen is provided a nutritionally balanced diet, that is consumed with far less foraging activity. Birds are motivated to forage and peck. One hypothesis is that hens may redirect their pecking, resulting in injurious pecking.

Researchers at the University of Saskatchewan, lead by Dr. Hank Classen and Sarah Johannson, are exploring ways to

reduce feather-pecking by allowing hens to engage in more foraging behaviour.

In a recent trial they discovered that **hens provided free access to barley silage** (along with the standard layer-diet) **performed half as much aggressive feather pecking as birds fed by current industry standards.** Egg production,

egg quality and weight gain were the same for both groups of birds in their study. Birds fed silage had improved overall feather condition at the end of the trial as a result of their decreased feather pecking behaviour.

Modern feeding practices may be contributing to the problem of feather pecking. This research may be offered as a potential feed aid.

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