


# Egg Eating by Chickens in Small and Backyard Poultry Flocks

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Egg eating is a habit that is easier to prevent than to stop. It usually starts as a result of accidental egg breakage. A curious hen pecks at a broken egg—perhaps trying to satisfy a calcium or vitamin D deficiency or typical chicken curiosity—and develops a taste for it. Chickens being imitators, others follow suit and quickly learn egg breaking and egg eating from one another.

## Preventing Egg Eating

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You can take action to help head off the habit of egg eating among your flock. Control measures to prevent egg eating include reducing stress and providing proper nutrition.

To reduce stress, use the following strategies:

- Before pullets begin laying, transfer them to the layer house and train them to use the nests.
- Provide roosts during the growing period to encourage nest use.
- Provide one 12-inch-by-12-inch nest for every four or five hens (never using fewer than six nesting boxes).
- Locate the nests at least 2 feet off the ground and at least 4 feet away from the roosts.
- Keep 2 inches of clean, dry nesting material in the nests at all times as protective egg padding.
- Remove all broody hens from the nesting area. They reduce nesting space and cause more traffic in the remaining nests.
- Do not use bright lights in your coops, especially near the nesting area. Bright light increases nervousness and picking habits.
- Do not scare the hens out of the nesting boxes; their sudden movements can break eggs in the nests.

Provide proper nutrition in the following ways:

- Feed a complete feed, and supplement with oystershell (a calcium source) through a free-choice feeding method. Chickens have a calcium appetite and will eat more oystershell if needed.
- As desired, use eggshell as a source of calcium, but be sure that the eggshell is dry and broken up before feeding it to the chickens. If hens associate the shell to eggs, they are more likely to pick at fresh eggs in the coop.
- Minimize feeding of scratch grains or cracked corn as this practice dilutes the nutrients provided by the complete feed. If you feed supplemental grain, give it only in the afternoon and only in a quantity that the hens can finish in 15 minutes.

## Stopping Egg Eating

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If egg eating is occurring in your flock, you can take steps to try to stop it. First, however, ensure that your birds are the egg eaters. Snakes, skunks, rats, weasels, and other predators could be the culprits instead. To determine whether your flock members are responsible for the egg eating, examine your hens. Egg-eating hens usually have dried yolk on their beaks and the sides of their heads. If you do catch an egg eater, it is best to cull it from the flock. Otherwise, other hens will imitate the behavior.

The following tricks *might* work to break an egg-eater:

- Feed liquid milk for a few days.
- Break an egg in a bowl, mix in 1 to 2 teaspoons of ground pepper, and pour the mixture on the floor so that the birds will eat it. The bad taste may reduce egg eating.

If all else fails, consider beak trimming. Identify egg-eating hens by looking for the presence of egg yolk on the beak or head. When you have identified an egg eater, trim 1/4 to 1/2 inch off the upper beak, making it difficult for the hen to break the shell of an egg. CAUTION: Only trained and monitored personnel should perform beak trimming, using proper equipment and procedures. Using beak trimming on an entire flock in high production can reduce feed consumption and egg production.

### **For More Information**

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Prevention of Egg Eating, Phillip Clauer, Virginia Tech.