

# Agriculture

You are here: [Home](#) > [Agriculture](#) > [Pests, diseases and weeds](#) > [Animal diseases](#) > [Poultry](#) > Quarantine advice for small poultry flocks

## Quarantine advice for small poultry flocks

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An easily avoidable disaster that can befall poultry enthusiasts is the introduction of disease into their flock. It can be a huge cost both financially and emotionally, to build up a valuable breed or line of poultry, only to have them jeopardised by the introduction of a diseased bird into the group.

Quarantine is derived from the French word "quarante" (forty) and originally described a period of isolation for 40 days. Traditionally, it was applied to ships in port, but it remains a very effective method of reducing the risk of disease entering a flock of poultry. The following suggestions are based on an article by Dr David Madill, a veterinarian specialising in avian medicine, and serve as a guideline for the introduction of new birds to your flock.

### Selecting healthy birds



Fig 1. Selection of healthy birds is one of the easiest ways to avoid disease in your flock.

When purchasing a bird, it is extremely important to select a healthy looking specimen. Starting with a bird that is even slightly unwell is to be avoided. The stress from handling, change of food, water and environment will often allow an already weak bird to be overcome by either the disease it is suffering, or another disease it may be carrying or exposed to.

Observe the bird carefully from a short distance. Birds are great disguisers of illness and will usually give an "I'm alright Jack" outlook if they are disturbed or handled.

Some points to look for in healthy birds include: -

**Feather cover** - should be even, tight and well coloured. There should be no indications of feather picking or of cannibalism;

**Eyes** - should be round, wide open and bright, and have no swelling around them;

**Vent** - should be clean and droppings well formed; **Feet** - should have clean skin and no toe deformities;

**Body weight** should be normal (feel keel bone to assess body weight);

**Nostrils, eyes and ears** – free from discharges;

**Beak** - should be normal and not split, overgrown or brittle;

**The bird should have been eating.** Check the crop for seed or pellets;

**The bird should be bright,** alert and interested in its surroundings.

Question the seller about the vaccination history of the bird. Many diseases such as Marek's disease and Infectious Laryngotracheitis (ILT) can be prevented by vaccination.

Ideally, birds should be purchased directly from the breeder. Avoid birds that have not been bred on the property. Purchasing birds from auctions, shows or mixed sales carries a greater risk of birds coming home with a disease, as many birds from various sources are mixed together, and conditions at the sale can be highly stressful.

## Quarantine – the facility

An entirely separate quarantine area should be used for new purchases. The area need not be particularly large but should contain similar perching material, wire and flooring to the main run. A distance of 10 meters from the main flock is sufficient to prevent aerosol transfer of most diseases.

All food and water dishes and food storage containers should be separate from the main run and used only for birds in the quarantine area.

The quarantine area should be inaccessible to foxes and other predators, and the food storage areas should be rodent proof.

Most importantly, feed and clean the birds in the quarantine area **AFTER** doing the main group. This prevents **YOU** transferring disease to the birds in your main run.

When birds leave the quarantine area, thorough cleaning of the cage and feeding utensils should be done. Replace perches (again using similar material to main enclosure) scrub the whole cage and wire with a solution of 2% hypochlorite, lime the floor, and if possible spell the area for at least a week.

The quarantine area **should not be used for any other purpose** such as a breeding enclosure etc.

## Quarantine – the procedure

Having purchased your healthy looking bird and brought it home, the following steps should be taken:

- Examine the bird for external parasites such as lice, mites, ticks, etc. These parasites may give rise to stress via anaemia and can carry other diseases such as tick fever. Parasites such as these will rapidly

spread and colonise other birds in close contact. If evidence of these parasites is seen, dust the bird with an insecticide powder recommended by your veterinarian. If you are at all unsure, dust the bird anyway, and repeat the treatment in 14 days.

- Have the droppings examined for round worm and tapeworm eggs (see your veterinarian). If present, worm the bird with an anthelmintic recommended by your vet. You will need to resample the bird in 6 weeks. This is because the round worm life cycle is about 6 weeks, so if you were unlucky and your bird picked up a roundworm egg the day you bought it, the first sample will be negative and it will take 6 weeks for mature egg-laying worms to develop. Ideally, two negative samples 6 weeks apart should be obtained before declaring the bird worm free.
- Have the droppings examined for evidence of coccidiosis (see your veterinarian). If negative, resample in 14 days; if positive treat with an appropriate drug. Wait for 2 clear samples.
- The routine use of antibiotics is **not** recommended during the quarantine period. However, if a bird becomes ill while in quarantine, treatment is required. If antibiotics are given routinely to new birds (especially over the entire quarantine period) there are several undesirable possibilities.
  - Over growth in the bowel of non-susceptible pathogenic organisms, especially yeasts and fungi;
  - The possibility of creating resistant strains of bacteria which will be transferred to the main flock via droppings, after the quarantine period has finished.
- It is important to use antibiotics sparingly and only when there is a good reason. Antibiotics are **NEVER** a substitute for good management, good nutrition and good housing.
- Vaccinate the birds to bring them up to the health status of the rest of the flock.
- Trim the bird's nails and renovate plumage if needed.

## Quarantine – how long is long enough?

Six weeks is the minimum time needed to fully evaluate the disease status of new birds. Birds recently infected with a disease take time to develop signs, and healthy looking birds can carry disease.

A minimum of 30 days, with 2 clear faecal samples and no signs of illness is suggested. **ANY** signs of illness and the time should be reset to day one.

**NEVER** put an "off" bird in with your other birds just because its time in quarantine is up. It is important not to mix birds in the quarantine area. The enclosure should be run on an "all in, all out" basis. If it is unavoidable, and new birds must be introduced to the quarantine enclosure (while other birds are there), the time for **all birds** to be released should be reset to day **one**.

## Quarantine - feeding

In quarantine, good nutrition is important. Seed, pellets, greens, and other food offered to the birds in quarantine should parallel those given in the main run. This avoids any potential digestive disturbances when transfer eventually occurs. Clean fresh water should be available continually. Vitamin and mineral supplements recommended by your veterinarian may also be used.

## Conclusion

All these instructions may seem difficult and time consuming, but the risk of introducing diseases that may cause the death of valuable birds is real. Implementing these recommendations will substantially reduce the risk of introducing disease to your flock. There are also real economic benefits, as the cost of veterinary visits and medications to treat diseases are reduced.

It may also be wise to place birds into quarantine after they return from a show or event. They may have been exposed to an infectious disease at the show, and if returned to the main flock, have the opportunity to pass it on to the rest of the flock.

## Acknowledgements

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