

Poultry Vices: Hidden Habits That Reduce Farm Profitability

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Abstract

Poultry farming is one of the fastest-growing sectors of animal husbandry. However various behavioural disorders or vices can adversely affect bird welfare, productivity, and farm profitability. Poultry vices are abnormal behaviours that develop due to management, nutritional, environmental, or genetic factors and often result in significant economic losses. Common vices observed in poultry include cannibalism, egg eating, egg hiding, pica, and feather picking. Factors such as overcrowding, nutritional deficiencies, excessive light intensity, parasitic infestations, and stress contribute to the development of these undesirable behaviours. Early identification of risk factors and implementation of preventive measures are essential for effective control. Proper housing, balanced nutrition, adequate feeder and drinker space, appropriate lighting management, provision of nesting facilities, timely egg collection, debeaking and maintenance of flock health can significantly reduce the occurrence of vices. Understanding the causes and preventive measures of poultry vices is crucial for improving bird welfare, enhancing productivity, and ensuring sustainable poultry production.

Keywords: Poultry Vices, Cannibalism, Egg Eating, Feather Picking

Introduction

Poultry farming has rapidly evolved as one of the fastest-growing sectors, providing nutritious food security, generating employment opportunities for poor and marginal farmers of India (Singh et al., 2021; Ali J., 2007). Commercial poultry production systems are designed to increase the productivity by applying scientific balance feeding, proper housing, and management practices (Nassar, 2026). However, in spite of advancement in poultry management, behavioural changes, commonly known as "vices," prevail in poultry farm which continue to cause significant economic losses to poultry farmers.

Vices are undesirable and bad habits acquired by birds due to stress, nutritional deficiency, environmental stress, and improper management deficiencies. These habits spread rapidly within the flock and become difficult to control. It adversely affects bird growth, egg production, feed efficiency, and farm profitability. The most important poultry vices include cannibalism, egg eating, egg hiding, pica, and feather picking.

Cannibalism

Cannibalism is one of the most important vices of poultry flocks. In this condition, birds attack and peck other birds, causing severe injuries and sometimes death. The problem is particularly common in large commercial flocks where birds are kept under intensive management systems. Cannibalistic behaviour often begins with toe pecking in chicks, feather pecking in growing birds, and vent pecking in laying hens (Fig 1). Once birds become accustomed to pecking and tasting blood, the behaviour spreads quickly throughout the flock.

Several Factors Contribute to The Development of Cannibalism

Overcrowding: Insufficient floor and cage space increases stress among birds and lead to aggressive behaviour

Genetic Factors: Certain breeds of poultry like Leghorns are more prone to cannibalism.

Vent and Genital Injuries: During egg laying, the bright pink appearance of the vent attracts pecking from other birds and minor bleeding further stimulates pecking.

Protein and Amino Acid Deficiency: Inadequate dietary protein, particularly deficiencies of methionine and arginine, can trigger feather pecking and cannibalism.

Mineral and Salt Deficiency: Lack of minerals and salt promote abnormal feeding behavior.

Parasitic Infestation: External parasites like mites, ticks damage feathers and skin, creating wounds that attract pecking.

Sudden Dietary Changes: Sudden changes in feed composition can cause stress and abnormal feeding behavior.

Excessive Lighting: High light intensity and prolonged lighting periods in the farm increase bird activity and aggression.

Prevention and Control

- Provide adequate floor space according to the age and size of birds.
- Ensure balanced nutrition with sufficient protein, amino acids, vitamins, and minerals.
- Avoid sudden changes in feed formulation.
- Maintain proper ventilation and environmental conditions in the farm.
- Isolate injured birds immediately from other birds.

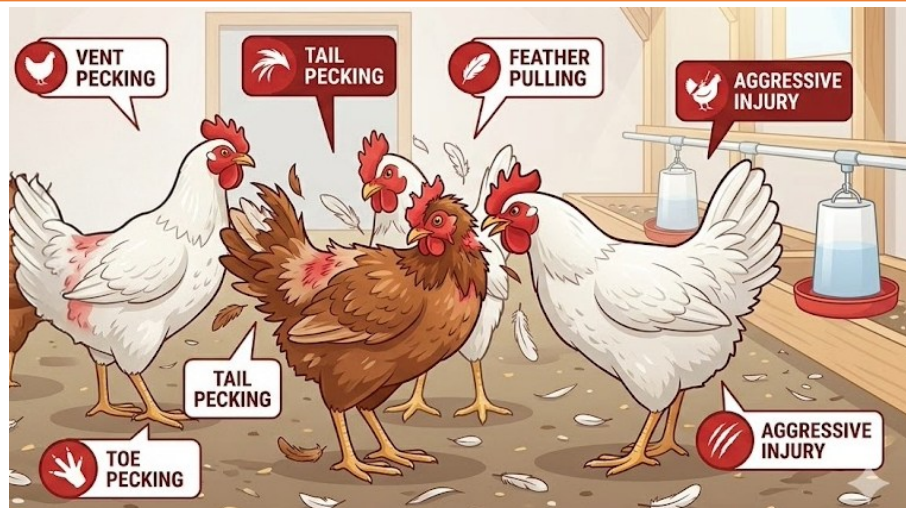


Fig. 1 Cannibalism in poultry (Image generated using Google Gemini AI)

- Provide adequate feeder and drinker space.
- Reduce excessive light intensity in poultry houses.
- Treat wounds promptly using suitable antiseptic preparations.
- Beak trimming (debeaking) has been used to reduce cannibalistic behavior. However, modern poultry welfare guidelines emphasize other management practices.

Egg Eating

Egg eating is another common vice in poultry, particularly among laying hens. Vice in bird start with accidentally broken eggs and gradually develop a habit of breaking and consuming eggs intentionally (Fig 2). Once established in the farm, the behavior can spread rapidly within the flock, leading to further damage to farm and economic losses.

Causes of Egg Eating

- Presence of cracked or broken eggs.
- Thin-shelled eggs resulting from calcium deficiency.
- Delayed egg collection.
- Inadequate nesting material.
- Overcrowding.
- Insufficient nest boxes.
- Excessively bright lighting.

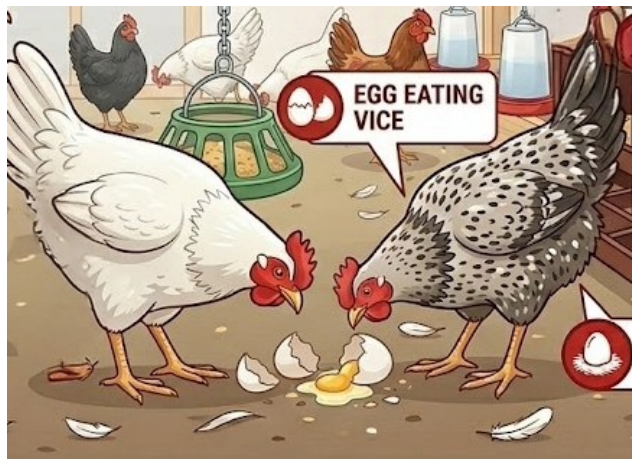


Fig. 2 Egg eating vice in poultry (Image generated using Google Gemini AI)

Preventive Measures

- Collect eggs frequently throughout the day.
- Provide adequate nesting boxes.
- Use soft bedding materials such as straw or sawdust.
- Remove broken eggs immediately.
- Maintain appropriate calcium and vitamin D levels in feed.
- Train pullets to use nest boxes before the onset of laying.
- Reduce light intensity in nesting areas.
- Use roll-away nests where possible to move eggs away from birds immediately after laying.
- Early identification and removal of habitual egg eaters

Egg Hiding

Egg hiding is less common in commercial poultry production but is occasionally observed in backyard and free-range systems. Birds hide their eggs in bushes, grass, or secluded locations instead of laying them in nests and farm (Fig 3).



Fig. 3 Egg hiding vice in poultry (Image generated using Google Gemini AI)

Prevention

- Restrict unnecessary roaming of laying birds.
- Provide comfortable and attractive nest boxes.
- Use adequate nesting materials such as straw, wood shavings, or sawdust.
- Maintain a quiet and secure laying environment.
- Proper nest management significantly reduces the occurrence of hidden eggs and associated production losses.

Pica

Pica, also known as depraved appetite, refers to the consumption of non-nutritive materials such as feathers, litter, threads, paper, or other foreign objects. Although less common in modern poultry operations, pica can still occur when birds experience nutritional deficiencies or environmental stress.

Causes of Pica

- Phosphorus deficiency.
- Mineral imbalance.
- Parasitic infestation.
- Introduction of unfamiliar litter materials.
- Poor management practices.
- Birds suffering from pica may ingest large quantities of foreign materials, leading to digestive disturbances and crop impaction.

Prevention

- Provide balanced and scientifically formulated diets.
- Ensure adequate mineral supplementation.
- Control parasitic infestations.
- Maintain clean and suitable litter conditions.
- Follow good management practices.
- Proper nutrition remains the most effective preventive measure against pica.

Feather Picking and Feather Eating

Feather pecking is a behavioural disorder in which birds pull out and sometimes consume feathers from themselves or other flock members. The behaviour may begin through curiosity and imitation but can become a serious flock problem if not addressed.

Factors Associated with Feather Picking

- Nutritional deficiencies.
- Lack of grit in feed.
- Poor-quality feed.
- Digestive disturbances.
- Overcrowding and stress.
- Inadequate environmental enrichment.
- Feather loss exposes the skin, increasing the risk of injuries, infections, and cannibalism.

Prevention

- Maintain balanced nutrition.
- Provide adequate grit where necessary.
- Avoid overcrowding.
- Improve environmental enrichment.
- Identify and remove persistently affected birds when required.
- Early intervention is essential because feather-picking habits are often difficult to eliminate once established.

The Importance of Good Poultry Management

Most poultry vices arise from management-related factors rather than disease. Proper housing, balanced nutrition, adequate space, environmental control, and regular monitoring of bird behaviour are key to preventing these problems. Farmers should inspect their flocks daily and identify abnormal behaviours at an early stage. Timely corrective measures not only improve bird welfare but also enhance productivity and profitability.

Conclusion

Behavioural vices such as cannibalism, egg eating, egg hiding, pica, and feather picking pose significant challenges to poultry production. Although these habits may appear minor initially, they can rapidly spread through a flock and cause substantial economic losses. Most vices can be prevented through proper nutrition, scientific housing, good management practices, and regular observation of bird behaviour. By understanding the causes and implementing preventive measures, poultry farmers can maintain healthy flocks, improve productivity, and ensure sustainable poultry farming (Dolberg, 2007).

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