

My chicken is losing feathers

First of all **don't panic!** Most of the reasons for feather loss are very treatable – or don't need treating. If you have just rescued some battery hens, these will often have lost large numbers of feathers due to their living conditions.

The first main cause of feather loss is a natural **moulting** process. The moult happens yearly to get rid of old, worn out feathers and replaces them with new. It takes just under a month. Chickens usually moult in late autumn, around October-November time, but it can vary. Mine decided to moult in December last year, despite the snow and ice...

The feather loss usually starts around the neck area and moves down the bird. Most will look a bit straggly, but some will have a more dramatic moult, losing nearly all their feathers at once – oven ready! You will soon start to see new feathers poking through the skin and your chicken will soon look better than ever.

During the moult many chickens will stop laying or not lay as often as a lot of energy will be put into growing new feathers. Because of this it is also important to make sure they have good quality food such as layers pellets to keep their energy levels up. Some people like to supplement with poultry spice or tonic, but a good quality diet is probably sufficient. Extra protein may be beneficial too (mine love mealworms).



Ex-battery hens with knitted jumpers
– not needed for normal moulting!

Feather loss may also occur because of “**hen-pecking**”, where one chicken is pecked at by another. This most often happens when new chickens are first introduced, or if an injury has occurred. Chickens are attracted to the colour red, so will peck if they see blood on another. (Interestingly, pheasants are attracted to yellow, not red!) Anti-pecking sprays are available which may help to discourage pecking, and “Pecka-Blocks” can keep your hens distracted by giving them something else to peck at. Getting rid of any blood is also a good idea. Old CDs hung on string can also be a useful distraction.

There could also be another reason for baldness and that is skin parasites (**mites or lice**). Dirty vent feathers, lots of scratching and dust bathing, hunched or withdrawn hens and soft shelled eggs are often indications that your hen has an infestation too. Mites can't be seen with the naked eye but they leave the skin looking sore, red and featherless. The hot spots where lice tend to hide are around the vent, under the wings, round the abdomen and chest and the neck area. Ruffle the feathers against the direction of growth and look for little scuttling creatures or tiny cream eggs stuck to the feather

shafts. If you come across any, you can get louse/mite powders from poultry feed suppliers, online sources and some large pet shops. Apply it to all your hens and repeat the treatment after a week to catch any eggs which might have hatched out.

Red Mite don't live on the hens but live inside the hen house and move onto the hens during the night so if you check in all the corners, pull out roosting bars if you can, check around the roof for signs of infestation. They aren't particularly easy to spot as they are only about 1mm long and are grey before feeding and red after due to the blood that they suck from the hens and this blood sucking can lead to anaemia and lethargy. If you have a red mite infestation in your chicken coop, you may see tiny blood spots on the hens eggs and there may also be a greyish powder which can be seen around the ends of the perches. If you wipe the undersides of the perches with a clean white paper towel and find red streaks on it, this will show that there are red mite in the coop.

To treat an infestation, you will need to remove everything from the coop which can be taken out and spray with a proprietary red mite treatment. Steam Cleaners will kill any lurking bugs and will get into corners and crevices very well indeed. You can get a product called Poultry Shield which is supposed to be particularly effective at removing red mite when used as a cleaner. Diatomaceous Earth is very good for treating the hens themselves and any nesting material or dustbaths too.

During warm weather, poultry mites can reproduce in about a week. Treating after a week has passed can mean the eggs that you didn't get the first time will have hatched, grown into adult laying mites and laid thousands more eggs. **Ensure you re-treat no later than every 5 to 6 days** to ensure the eggs that survived the first treatment and hatched cannot develop into egg laying adults.