

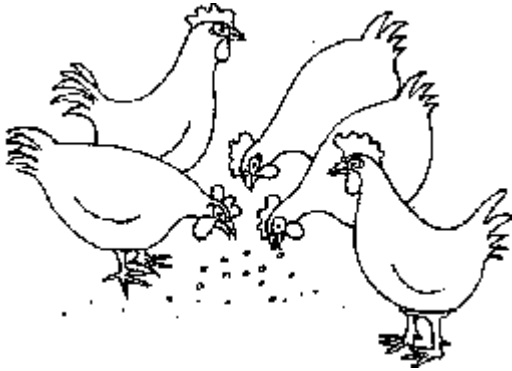


Directorate Communication



National Department of Agriculture

## Are my chickens healthy?



A J Olivier

If you know if your chickens are healthy or not you can:

- Treat sick chickens and prevent diseases spreading within your flock
- Change management practices that are affecting the health of your chickens
- Select only healthy chickens when buying new ones!

### Factors contributing to health

There are three important factors that contribute to the health of your poultry: management, environment and type of poultry.

#### **Management**

- Intensive systems

Poultry (broilers for meat production and layers for egg production) are kept in houses

- Extensive systems

Poultry are free ranging, and scavenge for food. This system of keeping chickens is usually found in rural communities where chickens are used for both egg and meat production (dual purpose chickens)

#### **Environment**

Environmental factors that can influence health include:

- Type of house
- Type of floor
- Climate

### **Type of poultry**

Poultry can be indigenous, dual purpose, commercial broilers or layers

### **How to know if your chickens are healthy**

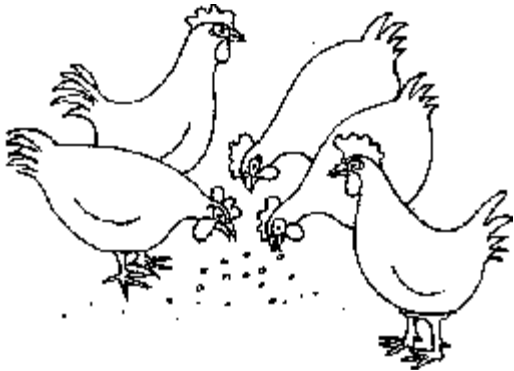
#### **General appearance**

When you start looking at your chickens, you should do so from a distance to observe their behaviour

- Do the chickens look healthy or are they sitting alone and looking puffed up?



- Are the chickens seeking food to eat, walking or looking for shelter during cold or very hot weather?
- Are the hens laying eggs regularly?
- Are the chickens the same size, or are some smaller than others?



#### **Look at different parts of the body from head to tail**

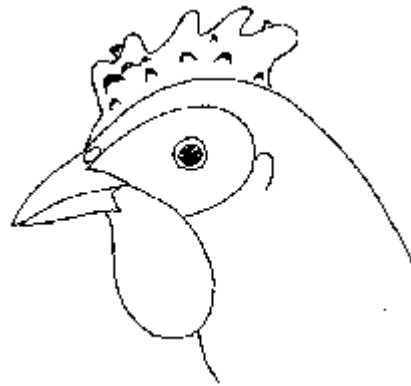
You should look at all the different parts of the body from head to tail.



## Head and neck

### Comb/wattles

- The wattles and comb of a healthy chicken should be a red colour
- A blue or black colour is not normal
- There should be no cuts or swellings

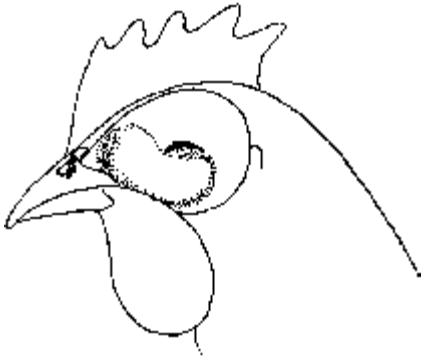


### Eyes

- The eyes should be round and open with a sparkle in them
- Eyes of sick chickens are usually closed or have an oval shape
- The eyes may be a dull white colour or they can be closed if there is a discharge of thick fluid

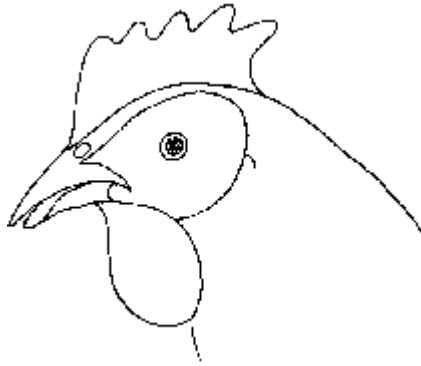
### Nostrils

- The nostrils should be clean and open for the chicken to breathe normally
- There should not be any fluid running from the nostrils. This can cause crusts that can totally block the nostrils, and the chickens will breathe with a snoring sound if the nostrils are closed in this way
- The area between the eyes and the nostrils (sinuses) should not be swollen



### Beak

- The beak should be a normal shape. There should not be any parts of the beak missing, unless it is a layer (the suppliers trim the top part of the beak to prevent layers from pecking each other in the cages)
- The beak (usually closed) is open and the chickens breathe very fast when the nostrils are blocked, the chickens are under stress or the temperature is very high
- The beak should not feel soft and rubbery



### Neck

- The neck should be strong and straight to keep the head high. It should not be weak and twisted

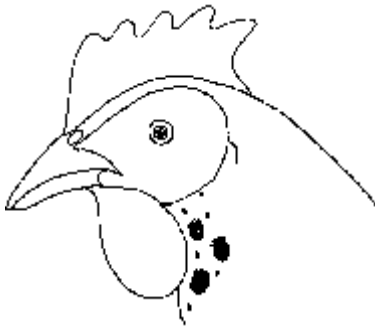


### Body



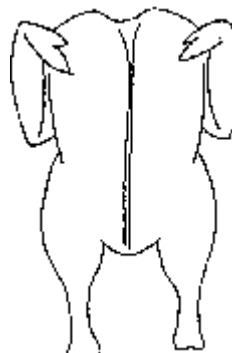
## Feathers

- The entire body should be covered by feathers except for some of the indigenous breeds where the neck and chest may be bare. The feathers protect the body against extreme temperatures
- The feathers are normally flat against the body and are only raised when the chicken sleeps, in cold weather or when it is sick
- Other chickens or the chicken itself should not be pulling out the feathers
- The feathers should be clean because chickens clean themselves every day. Feathers that are very dirty with droppings around the vent may be an indication of diarrhoea
- You should check between the feathers for ticks and lice. Ticks are usually found around the head and lice on the feathers of the neck and wings



## Condition

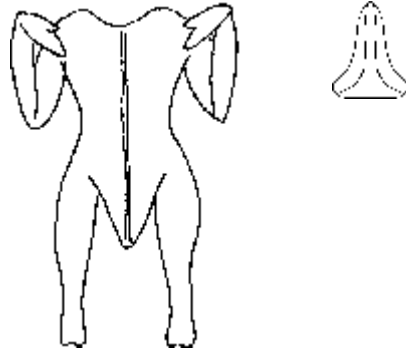
- While the chicken is in your hands it is a good idea to evaluate the condition of the chicken by feeling the muscles around the breastbone
- For a healthy chicken the muscle covers the breastbone
- If you can feel the breastbone very clearly with little muscle covering on each side it may be an indication that the chicken is sick and has not been eating for a while or that it is not receiving



Healthy chicken



enough food



The chicken is sick or is not receiving enough food

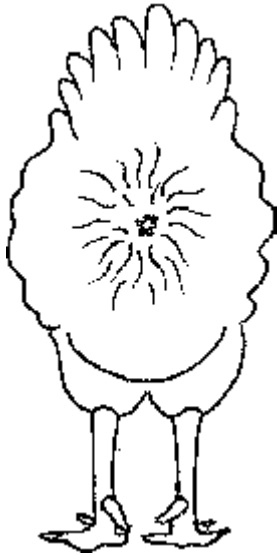
### Legs

- The legs should be strong, straight and smooth
- The colour of the legs is usually yellow
- There should not be any cuts, swellings or crusts on the legs
- The chickens should walk normally without limping

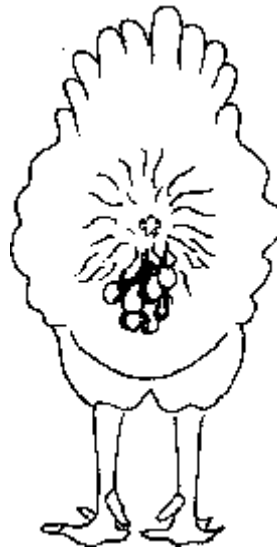


### Tail and vent

- The tail and vent area should be clean and the feathers should be soft and fluffy
- A swelling can be an indication of an egg that cannot pass
- Caked faeces could be an indication of diarrhoea



Healthy chicken



Diarrhoea

### If there are signs that chickens are sick

- If they are chickens you are thinking to buy, do not buy them
- Separate sick chickens from healthy chickens
- Get advice from a veterinarian or an animal health technician

For further information contact your nearest  
state veterinarian or animal health technician

or

*Animal Health for Developing Farmers*  
ARC-Onderstepoort Veterinary Institute  
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