We all know that coughs and sneezes spread diseases, but it’s worth remembering that this advice isn’t only restricted to ourselves. Chickens, too, can run into problems of this sort, with one of the most prominent being a disease called mycoplasma.

We’re now in the depths of winter, with Christmas and the New Year passed and, hopefully, our chickens comfortable and contented in their dry, draught-free poultry houses. But, as it is with us, this dreary period of the year is a prime time for colds and sneezes among hens. Mycoplasma can do the rounds within a flock, and it’s also of concern to breeding birds, due to its transmission through to the egg.

During the winter months, mycoplasma can start to be a real problem; cold temperatures help to provide the ideal environment for the organism to spread and, with the birds spending more time inside their houses due to the bad weather, stressors can trigger an outbreak.

Environmental issues
A bird’s immediate surroundings within the hen house are a key factor, so avoiding overcrowding, keeping dust and ammonia levels to a minimum and allowing good ventilation are prime methods of controlling the disease.

A common misconception is that chickens are going to feel the cold at this time of year, but it’s important to realise that a chicken has a normal body temperature of 40-42°C (compared to the human body temperature of around 37°C). What’s more, with the benefit of the insulation provided by their feathers, birds can maintain this higher temperature with very little difficulty.

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Watery eyes and nostrils are one of the few outward signs that a bird is suffering with mycoplasma. Carriers will present no symptoms at all.

On the whole, antibiotics will only reduce the clinical signs of the infection. After the event is a good way of ensuring you’re not inadvertently bringing anything new into the flock.

While exhibiting birds at poultry shows is always a potential cause of trouble, a far greater concern is the risk posed by buying-in stock from poultry auctions. At these events it’s likely that the sale birds will have become stressed due to the transport they’ve endured and the changes in the environment. In addition to this, though, the fact that they’ll more than likely be put into close confinement with a hotchpotch of other birds, compounds the potential for problems.

So, if birds are purchased from an auction, then my advice is that a two-week isolation period should be organised to ensure the newcomers settle effectively. This will also allow sufficient time for any signs of disease to be picked up and treated, before the new birds are introduced to the main flock.

Safety measures
When dealing with the isolated poultry, it’s important that all equipment used is kept separate from the main flock, and that the birds are far enough away from each other that there’s no chance of spread by the air. If this is unavoidable, though, preventing beak-to-beak contact between the groups will significantly reduce the risk of spread.

The careful management of the daily husbandry routine can also help; the responsible keeper should only ever visit the isolated, quarantined birds after dealing with the main flock. Tackling things the other way around will greatly increase the chances of something nasty being transferred from the ‘unknown’ birds to the existing flock. Although this is a simple, commonsense measure, it’s something that’s easily overlooked, especially by less-experienced keepers.

Mycoplasma certainly isn’t a new disease and, in its time, has been known by many other names. Some of them are still used today, and a couple that I most commonly hear in the clinics are ‘bubble eye’ and ‘cold’. At the root of the problem is an organism – a type of small bacteria – that lacks a cell wall. It’s this feature which effectively limits our ability to treat affected birds with some antibiotics, and is one reason why it remains such a persistent organism.

There are 17 different avian strains of mycoplasma that are fairly species-specific, but only four of these affect domestic poultry.

Mycoplasma can be present with other germs that cause respiratory infections, and this can form a mixed infection. Commonly, infectious bronchitis – a viral infection – can trigger an outbreak of mycoplasma too, or can appear on its own with similar clinical signs.

Not only does mycoplasma pass from bird to bird through coughs and sneezes, it can also pass from parents to offspring in what’s termed ‘vertical’ transmission. This is where females and males can infect the

Top 5 tips
• Quarantine: new birds should be isolated for two weeks.
• Environment: ensure the housing is clean and well ventilated.
• Diagnosis: not all coughs and colds are mycoplasma, so correct diagnosis is very important.
• Isolation: sick birds should be isolated and treated responsibly with antibiotics.
• Prevention: this is far is better than cure. Good husbandry underpins a healthy flock.

There are few antibiotics available for treating mycoplasma; it’s a condition best dealt with by good husbandry and very careful stock control and acquisition.
Poultry problems explained

Embryo before the egg is laid. However, this is uncommon and only occurs in birds that are showing signs of the disease around the time of mating. When it does occur, though, it’s bad news for the vitality of the chick, and also significantly increases the risk of an outbreak in the other hatchlings.

Confusing signs
Mixed infections, therefore, can pose a conundrum to the clinician. In the ideal case, bacterial swabs with culture of the infection would be performed to make sure the treatment used is correct. This approach is used in large-scale poultry farms, with a whole-flock view to controlling an outbreak. Swabbing and culturing for individual, infected birds is generally not performed in a domestic flock situation, due to the cost involved. So a good clinical examination by a vet experienced in the diagnosis and treatment of poultry, is well worthwhile as subtleties in the presentation of the condition can influence the treatment that’s given.

The treatment of mycoplasma is limited, with very few licensed antibiotics available for laying hens, and even fewer available to vets in general or companion animal practices. On the whole, antibiotics will only reduce the clinical signs of the infection, and aren’t a guaranteed way of removing the organism itself.

It’s important to us all that antibiotics are used in a responsible manner, and if clinical signs haven’t disappeared after the prescribed course of treatment, then further veterinary advice should be sought. In a non-responding case, extending the treatment with the same antibiotic is highly unlikely to help.

A further complication is that ‘carrier’ status birds can exist that show no clinical signs of the disease, but carry the infection. Even birds that have been treated with antibiotics – and showing no clinical signs – can still be carriers. This is one of the main reasons why outbreaks follow a period of stress within the flock.

Vaccination is an option, but it’s only effective with birds or chicks that haven’t been exposed to the disease, but carry the infection. Even birds that have been treated with antibiotics – and showing no clinical signs – can still be carriers. This is one of the main reasons why outbreaks follow a period of stress within the flock.

The clinical signs of mycoplasma can vary depending on the strain. The classical, cold-like appearance generally indicates mycoplasma gallisepticum. However, lameness and hot joints can be a sign of mycoplasma synoviae. Most commonly this condition presents itself with the birds looking under the weather, typically accompanied by a discharge from the eyes (causing bubbling) and/or from the nasal openings.

The discharge can vary in consistency, and may appear clear in the early stages, then coloured as the condition progresses.

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Vet Martin Smith believes that, as far as mycoplasma is concerned, prevention is very much better than cure. Good flock management and an effective husbandry routine are essential requirements.

Need help?

If you need further help and advice about problems with your chickens, then why not consult Martin Smith via the Ask the Vet board on the Practical Poultry forum? It’s free for all to use and is just a handful of clicks away. Go to www.practicalpoultry.com select the Forum then scroll down to find the Ask the Vet board; it’s as simple as that!