

# Summary: Reducing the need for Beak Trimming in Laying Hens

## The Problem

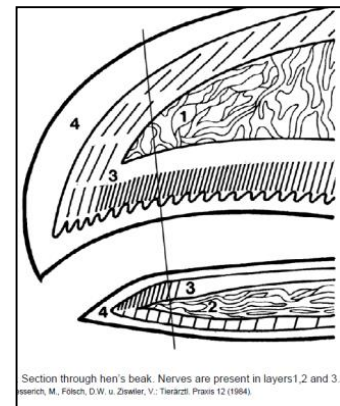
### Feather pecking



Feather pecking (injurious pecking, which differs from aggressive pecks aimed at the head or neck) is an abnormal behaviour in laying hens which can occur in all types of housing system. It is caused by multiple factors including breed, environment, health and management; but is mainly caused by the frustration of foraging behaviour. Feather pecking is a serious welfare issue because it can lead to skin wounds, bare plumage causing poor thermoregulation, reduced preening, mortality and cannibalism in the flock. Pecking typically begins in a small group, but can rapidly transmit through a flock.

### Beak trimming

Beak trimming is the main method used to control feather pecking, which involves removing a portion of the beak, (up to a third in the EU), with a red-hot blade or infra-red beam. The beak is a complex organ which contains extensive nerves and receptors (see figure to right: trimming cuts through nerve layers 1, 2 and 3). The hot-blade technique leads to nerve and tissue damage, open wounds and bleeding and can lead to long term chronic pain with the development of painful neuromas if performed at an older age. The infra-red technique does not cause an open wound, but is acutely painful and reduces natural behaviours. Both methods cause pain, reduce growth and cause changes to behaviour. The practice continues in the UK (before 10 days with infra-red only) – whether a ban will be implemented will be reviewed in 2015.



## The Solution

To allow hens to keep their beaks intact without feather pecking, the factors described below must be considered. Addressing several of these factors simultaneously best reduces the risk of feather pecking.

### Feeding mash instead of pellets



Feeding a high fibre, low-energy diet of mash rather than pellets increases feeding time, fulfils the motivation for pecking and reduces feather pecking.

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<http://www.compassioninworldfarming.com/media/5789269/laying-hens-reducing-the-need-for-beak-trimming.pdf>

### Providing areas for resting and refuge

Providing high perches (70cm from the floor) can reduce feather pecking and improve plumage cover. Providing a separate resting area protects birds from being pecked while they are inactive.



### Enhancing foraging opportunities

Providing high quality foraging material or objects, such as long straw, string (white is preferred), or polystyrene blocks encourages foraging and can reduce feather pecking. Other pecking materials such as maize, barley-pea silage or carrots can reduce severe pecking and improve plumage.

### Maximising use of outdoor space



Encouraging use of outdoor space in free-range systems vastly reduces feather pecking. This can be managed for example, by providing more than 5% tree-cover near the house, artificial shelters or verandas at the edge of the house, herbs strips and a varied complex environment within the range.

### Providing early outdoor access and matching rear-to-lay conditions

During the rearing period (before laying) increasing foraging and dustbathing reduces the onset of feather pecking reduces the risk of cannibalism later in life. This can be achieved by providing access to litter, an outdoor range, perches, a lower stocking density and by providing a similar environment to laying. Using dark brooders, a covered enclosure for rearing chicks, reduces feather pecking in later life by separating active from inactive birds and preventing the early onset of injurious pecking.

### Cost

Preventing feather pecking does not need to be expensive as often believed. The estimated costs (in GBP), which account for future gains are 12p/hen to provide 8 outdoor shelters, 20p/hen to provide breeze blocks and to carry out more frequent inspections, and 12p/hen to provide straw bales.



For a detailed practical guide to avoiding injurious pecking, see Bristol University's management guide at <http://www.featherwel.org/>

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