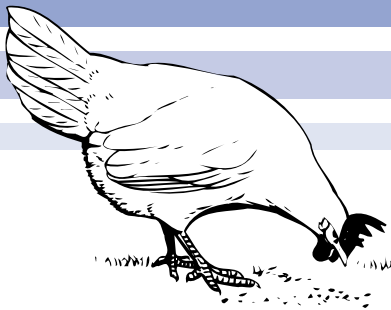


# Cannibalism in the Small Poultry Flock

David L. Hasemann  
Graduate Student—Masters, Animal Sciences  
and Industry, Kansas State University

R. Scott Beyer  
Extension Specialist, Poultry Science,  
Kansas State University



**Kansas State University  
Agricultural Experiment Station and  
Cooperative Extension Service**

*Cannibalism is a problem that may occur at any age and among all breeds of poultry. Cannibalistic birds cause injury to another bird by picking at each other's feathers, toes, etc.*

*Birds have a natural tendency to imitate each other. Therefore, this behavior greatly influences the rate at which cannibalism spreads through a flock. If cannibalism is not closely monitored, the resulting losses to the flock due to flesh injuries and death can be substantial.*

Cannibalism may be influenced by one or more of the following factors:

### **Excessive Lighting**

Maintain adequate light for growth and egg production. With broiler-type birds, the common practice is to use 16 hours of light and eight hours of dark per day at an intensity of ½- to 2-foot candles. Egg-type birds are usually reared under 10 to 12 hours of light per day at an intensity of ½-foot candle from 0 to 18 weeks. At the time of housing in the laying house, lights are increased to 13 hours of light per day at an intensity of 1- to 2-foot candles, increasing 15 minutes per week until 16 hours of light is reached. This light program will help delay sexual maturity to increase early egg size while also allowing the birds to slowly adjust to the change in lighting. In general, brighter light in the house results in more cannibalism than when the lights are dimmed. A 40-watt bulb is generally sufficient in a small house.

### **Overheating**

High temperatures cause birds to become uncomfortable and prone to pecking. Provide adequate space, fresh cool water, and proper ventilation for birds according to their age.

### **Nutrition**

It is important to provide a well-balanced ration with an ample supply of water. Ask

your feed or chick supplier for more specific details, or contact your local extension specialist.

### **Overcrowding**

Allow adequate space for each bird to nest, eat and drink—failure to do so can encourage competition that may result in cannibalism and keep the birds that are lower in the pecking order away from feed and water. Total square feet of space allowed per bird is not that important; birds are highly gregarious—they like to flock together. For example, when placed in a very large pen, two birds will soon end up standing next to one another.

### **Intermingling of Birds**

Combining birds of different ages, breeds, colors or sizes that have not been reared together often upsets the social order of the flock, thus increasing the chances of cannibalism. Avoid intermingling of birds. Otherwise, start rearing the birds together at the earliest age possible, then slowly allow them increased contact time.

### **Breed**

Some poultry producers claim that certain breeds are more prone to cannibalism. This, most likely, is not the only causative agent. Proper management of the previously discussed factors will assist you in heading off most, if not all, incidences of cannibalism.



**Figure 1.** A 12-week-old egg production pullet with an untrimmed beak. Notice the length and downward ‘hook’ of the beak that could easily harm other birds.



**Figure 2.** A 12-week-old pullet that has been properly trimmed using the late, heavy trim method will be less prone to cannibalism and is able to perform as well as untrimmed birds.



**Figure 3.** A 45-week-old layer trimmed at 7 days of age using the medium trim method shows some regrowth of the beak without the sharp downward ‘hook’ which often leads to increased injury.

Photos courtesy of Instructional Technology Center, Veterinary Medicine and the Department of Diagnostic Medicine and Pathology, Kansas State University.

### **Controlling Cannibalism**

The best way to control cannibalism is to try several methods. Remember, once cannibalism has started, it is often too late to change the flock’s behavior.

Some methods used to control cannibalism are:

- Beak-trimming.
- Goggles attached to the bird’s beak.
- Remove injured birds.
- Continue dim light.
- Increase space by turning birds outside.
- Remove birds that show aggressive pecking behavior.
- Provide scratch grain in deep litter.
- Change feed often to depress pecking.
- Spread grass clippings in the pen daily.

These methods have been shown to decrease cannibalism; however, at other times there were no noticeable changes in the flock’s behavior. The only proven method that has consistently been effective in preventing and stopping cannibalism is beak-trimming. (Figures 1, 2 and 3) Although some flock owners may be concerned with the slight discomfort caused by beak trimming, uncontrolled cannibalism often results in more pain experienced by the bird or even death. **Note:** Beak trimming should be demonstrated by an experi-

enced person and/or conducted under the direct supervision of such an individual to ensure the accuracy of the procedure and proper handling of birds.

There are several theories as to what is the best method and age to beak trim. Depending on your management style, you should pick the one that best fits your flock. Some examples are listed below.

Generally, any age from 1 to 6 weeks is the best time to conduct the trimming procedure for small home flocks. Trimming earlier than 1 week of age most likely will require a second trimming due to regrowth of the beak. Trimming any time after 6 weeks of age has been noted to decrease bird growth and, in some cases, sexual maturity and egg production may be delayed. The best method of trimming is to remove one-third to one-half of both beaks. This allows more beak to remain than the heavy trim method and still decreases the birds ability to peck and cause injury.

Beak trimming is most effective when it is done using an electric trimmer that cauterizes as it cuts. This ensures accurate trimming while also decreasing the amount of bleeding associated with the procedure.

List of ages and methods of trimming most often used:

<b>Ages</b>	<b>Methods</b>
• 1 day	• top only = trim 1/3 to 1/2 of the top beak only
• 7-10 days	• light trim = trim 1/3 of both beaks
• 6 weeks	• medium trim = trim 1/2 of both beaks
• 10-12 weeks or 18 weeks	• heavy trim = trimming both beaks, leave about a nickel’s width in front of the nasal openings

Light bleeding is normal after trimming. The bleeding will usually stop within five to 10 minutes.

### ***Tips for Pre- and Post-Trimming***

To help minimize stress on the flock before and after trimming:

- Slowly, work with the birds.
- Work during a cool part of the day.
- Use a sharp blade in your trimming machine. It should not be too hot or too cold. A glowing, cherry-red colored blade is desired (1,100°F).
- Avoid conducting other procedures on the birds at the time of trimming like: vaccinating, moving the flock to a new location,

wing banding, dubbing, dewaddling, etc.

- Trim completely through the beak before removing it from the blade. Torn flesh could result and cause injury.
- Leave the beak on the blade to be cauterized for a short time, approximately two seconds.
- Be careful to not cut the bird's tongue. This can be prevented by placing the index finger under the bird's lower beak and sliding back towards the neck, holding the tongue out of the way. Hold this position until the entire trimming and cauterizing process is complete.
- Keep the blade and trimming bar in perfect align-

ment to ensure an accurate trim.

- Provide adequate amounts of fresh cool water and feed at all times. Supply the feed at deeper than normal levels in the feeder as the birds' beaks are very tender for about one week and this could deter them from pecking the bottom of the feed pan.

- Add feed often throughout the day to stimulate intake.

It is impossible to guarantee that cannibalism will not occur in a flock but a few of these management techniques may reduce the incidence. If you would like further information on controlling cannibalism, contact your chick supplier or extension specialist.

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