

Broodiness in Chickens

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Broodiness is the term used to describe a hen that is preparing to naturally incubate eggs and raise newly hatched chicks. When broodiness occurs in a hen, certain behavioral changes may be evident. These changes include increasing time spent in the nest, being overly protective of the eggs and nest, changes in the consumption of feed and water, and the stopping of egg production.

Having hens go broody can be a positive or a negative depending on what your purpose for the hen is. A broody hen can serve as a natural incubator for any fertile eggs you might want to hatch. However, if egg production is important to you, broodiness in hens is not desirable and will reduce your egg numbers. When broody, hens do not lay eggs. Broody hens can also keep other hens out of the nest boxes, which may cause an increased number of floor eggs.



How do you know your hen is broody?

Hens will sit in a nest for a long time before actually laying an egg. Just finding a hen in the nest box is not sufficient to conclude that the hen has gone broody. If she is sitting in the nest box all day, only coming out for short trips to the feeder and waterer, she may be broody. She will pull out some of her breast feathers and place them in the nest box. She does this to cushion and insulate the eggs. She also has a brood patch that supplies extra heat for the incubating eggs.

When you approach a broody hen in the nest, she will peck at you and fiercely protect her territory. Since a hen will not come out of the nest box very often, the droppings stay in the intestines for a longer period. As a result, the broody hen may have droppings with a noticeably foul odor.

Why does a hen become broody?

A hen has a hormone surge prior to laying an egg. Some of the hormones can cause the hen to find and prepare a nest.

The hormones usually return to normal levels after the egg is laid. Occasionally hormone levels will stay high, triggering broodiness. The same hormones that prepare a mammal to lactate after birth cause broodiness in hens. Some breeds have a higher tendency for broodiness than other breeds. These include Buff Orpingtons, Cochins, Australorps, Sussex, Brahas, and Silkies. Some hens will become broody once a year and that will be it. Other hens can be “serial” brooders. Even after broodiness is broken, a hen may become broody again the next month. The commercial strains of layers have been selected to reduce broodiness and the desire to incubate eggs.

Can you stimulate broodiness in a hen?

Broodiness cannot be turned on and off like a light switch. Leaving eggs in a nest may trigger a hen to become broody, but that is not always the case. Broodiness in a hen can occur whether or not there is a rooster present to produce fertile eggs. As noted above, broodiness tends

to be breed specific. A breed known for broodiness has individual hens that easily become broody. These hens may not even need eggs to become broody. That is, they may brood in a nest with no eggs. This can be a great tool for naturally hatching out chicks. Hens will brood eggs from other chickens, as well as from other poultry species such as turkeys, ducks, or even guinea fowl.

How do you stop a broody hen?

When a hen goes broody, and she lays a certain number of eggs (called a clutch), she stops laying eggs. She wants to hatch her eggs and raise chicks. If you have a broody hen but do not want her to sit on eggs, it may be hard to change her behavior. Sometimes, if you wait 21 days, she will hatch the chicks or eventually give up, but this is not always the case. The peeping of the hatched chicks signals to a broody hen that she is done setting. If no eggs hatch under her, she will not get the signal to stop. Some hens will not give up even if they are not able to hatch out chicks.

To discourage broodiness, collect all eggs as frequently as possible. If a hen still appears broody, you can try removing the hen from the nest at night and placing her on a perch with the other hens. You

can close the nest to remove access to the nest boxes at night and after the other hens have laid their eggs. If that does not work, you can put her in a wire-bottomed cage in the middle of the coop. Provide

her with feed and water but no nesting material. It may take a few days, but the absence of a nest or nesting material frequently works to stop the broodiness in the hen.

Photo by Dr. Jacquie Jacob