

Hormone Injections For Egg-laying Hens?

Excessive egg-laying can cause serious health and behavior problems, but there are ways to prevent it.

7-9-2006

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, Dip. ABVP – Avian Practice

As we learn how to properly care for our pet birds, they are living longer and healthier lives. One side effect of all this is that pet birds are approaching sexual maturity at early ages and often begin demonstrating sexual behaviors. Excessive egg-laying in hens – cockatiels, Eclectus and many cockatoo species are prone to this behavior - can lead to health problems.

Egg-laying hens require a balanced, healthy diet and additional calcium. Cuttlebone, mineral blocks, cottage cheese or other types of cheese (the lactose is removed in the process of making these products), TumsTM and almonds are all good sources of calcium. Full-spectrum light or natural sunlight (not filtered through glass or plastic) to provide UVB ultraviolet light is necessary for normal calcium metabolism.

There are several options for dealing with an egg-laying hen, which were discussed in the print edition of Bird Talk's August issue. These include manipulation of her environment and, as a last resort, surgery. In the right situation, hormonal injections are a good option, too, but they will work best if you change the bird's environment (less daylight hours, removing perceived nesting areas, etc.) at the same time.

Leuprolide acetate (LupronTM) can be very effective in stopping egg-laying, especially if injections are given prior to the first egg being laid. Chorionic gonadotropin or human chorionic gonadotropin (HCG), another popular hormone, costs less than leuprolide acetate, but it works best if the bird receives the first injection before she ovulates. For this to happen, owners need to observe the hen's mood and be able to tell when she's acting "broody." If the hen ovulates before receiving the injection, then she will likely lay at least one egg.

Medroxyprogesterone acetate can cause dangerous and potentially deadly side effects, so I do not recommend it.

Melatonin, another hormone, is secreted by the pineal gland (a small gland in the middle of the brain), and it is involved in the sleep-wake cycle. Research on this hormone is ongoing, sometimes in conjunction with other medications for egg-laying problems (and also for feather-picking).

The decision of what to do for an egg-laying hen should be made based on her medical condition, your avian vet's opinion and the owner's feelings on the subject. If your avian vet is not well-versed in reproductive issues, ask him or her to request a consultation with an avian specialist affiliated with their veterinary diagnostic lab.