Molting of Laying Hens (and roosters too)
Role of feathers

- Protection and insulation for the body.
- Check out University of Illinois Extension’s Incubation and Embryology – Chicken Feathers @
  http://extension.illinois.edu/eggs/res12-feathers.html
Role of feathers

• Too much feather loss makes it more likely that injuries will occur to the exposed flesh resulting in infections or bruising of the tissues.

• In addition, excessive feather loss can result in higher energy utilization requirements to maintain body temperature.
Why do chickens molt?

- It’s a natural process
- Replace old, worn feathers
- Rejuvenates a hens oviduct (organ that makes eggs)

It is nature’s way of providing laying birds a rest period prior to the stimulus for maximum reproductive performance in the spring.
Why should you care about molting?

• Molting is stressful and energy intensive for chickens
• Putting energy into feather growth, leaves little for egg production
....Resulting in hens not laying at all or only very sporadically

Feathers are 85% protein
Ok, what happens during molting?

- Every year, once a year, chickens will shed their feathers
- Natural molt occurs at the end of an extended, intensive laying period
- This occurs in the fall with shorter days and cooler temperatures
Length of Natural Molting

• Some chickens lose a few feathers and grow them back in as quickly as 3-4 weeks.
• Other chickens lose a lot of feathers and 12-16 weeks to grow them back.
• A good high producing flock tends to molt late and rapidly
Let’s look at the molting process

- Chickens will lose their feathers in a sequence
  - Head
  - Neck
  - Body (breast, back and abdomen)
  - Wings
  - Tail

Pin feathers are sensitive to touch, so handle your flock with care during the molt.
Primary wing feather will begin to be shed before secondaries. Primaries will be lost sequentially from innermost t #1 to outermost #10.

From *Molting and Determining Production of Laying Hens*, David D. Frame, DVM, Extension Poultry Specialist
What should you do during molting?

- #1 Feed a high protein feed (at least 16%)
- Make feed available free choice
- Would limit scratch or not use scratch feed

Scratch grains are like French fries—chickens that eat too many scratch grains have less of an appetite for more nutritious feed.
Other tips for helping chickens get through molting

• Reduce stress as much as possible, avoiding bringing new birds into the flock
• Chickens should act normal during their molt – if they seem sick, something else is wrong
• Avoid handling your chickens during molt, it’s painful for them and increases stress
• Keep them sheltered from the wind and rain, where they can keep themselves warm and dry whilst they’re a bit bald
Before and after...