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## Symptoms of water belly in chickens

Have you ever had a chicken with a swollen abdomen and not known what to do? Even if you haven't seen it before, knowing about it before it happens can be helpful. What Causes a (Chicken) Swollen Abdomen? Technically, a swollen abdomen in a chicken is called Ascites (or Water Belly). It happens when fluid builds up in the abdominal cavity. As the fluid builds, it pushes on the lungs of the chicken, making it increasingly harder for them to breathe. With decreased respiratory function, the tips of her comb might begin to turn purplish or blue. She might have difficulty moving around and she might have labored breathing. There isn't a cure. While not terribly common in backyard flocks, it does happen and can be caused from all sorts of things: genetics, obesity, stress, the build up of proteins in vital organs, exposure to toxic things (eating toxic plants, breathing in toxic air, etc.) among other things. It's important to note that there are other causes of swollen abdomen besides Water Belly such as obesity, egg binding, fatty liver, tumors, Marek's disease, getting a piece of egg stuck somewhere inside that is causing an infection...but in this instance, I'm focusing on Ascites. Jessica's Swollen Abdomen I first noticed Jessica's swollen abdomen the beginning of July. It felt like a water balloon filled taut, about to burst. Jessica didn't show any signs of being sick, though. She was still eating, drinking, walking and running, chatting with me. All the normal chicken behavior of a friendly, social hen. I would never had noticed if I hadn't picked Jess up and encountered her big water balloon belly with my hand. WHOA. I seriously doubted Jessica was egg bound. She showed no other signs (although her swollen abdomen was very similar to Harriet's when Harriet was egg bound). So, I did what I often do when the girls have me stumped, and I tried to find a reason for her water weight gain via research. What seemed to make the most sense was Water Belly (Ascites). And that's certainly what it felt like. However, Jessica didn't have any of the high risk factors. She wasn't overweight. She lived in a low altitude, with a coop that has good ventilation. She was the top hen in the flock and lived a very comfy life. Of course, there's no telling what she might have gotten into (toxic plants? Moldy something? Who knows) that could have helped cause this issue. But regardless, she had a huge liquid mass growing in her abdomen that was larger than a softball. Some advice said to drain it, others said to leave it. I decided to leave it as she didn't seem to be struggling with it in any way. And we went on like that for a few weeks. Until one day, the poor girl looked like she was saddle sore, waddling like a pigeon-toed duck, and having a hard time jumping up onto things. She was still eating, drinking, happy, but I could tell she wasn't very comfortable. Her breathing was also getting labored, as the mass grew and pressed on her lungs. So, I decided to try to drain it. I don't know if any of you ever call local vets and ask for weird items like syringes and catheters? Um, yea. It didn't go over so well.... "Excuse me? You want what? Do you have any experience with this? Do you have any training?" Well, I watched a YouTube video and did some research. "We can't sell you this sort of thing. We suggest you take your hen to a vet who specializes in birds." Yea, well, that's not going to happen. Besides, how hard can it be? Thankfully I DO have a vet friend, although she's a cat vet, who has helped me with Peep's bumlefoot surgery and given me prescriptions when Harriet sounded like Darth Vader. I texted her for the supplies, and she told me to swing by clinic, pick up said supplies, and bring them to her house (with Jessica) so she could teach me how to use them. It really IS a simple procedure, although I've never stuck a needle into the backside of a hen before. (It slid in like butter on a hot knife). Jessica didn't mind. We drained off 2 ounces of fluid that looked like a green smoothie (which is unfortunate since I drink green smoothies several times per week). My vet friend said she's never seen fluid like that come out of an animal. She took a picture and sent it to her chicken vet friend who said the same thing. Mystery fluid. For three days straight, I pulled fluid out of Jessica's swollen belly. I'd drain it, she'd re-fill it. She was very cooperative. I think it was definitely one of those times when "This hurts me more than it hurts you" was actually true. But we got by. After removing more than three cups of faux-green-smoothie, she was able to run and jump easier than when she was slinging that volume along behind her. (For those of you that don't know-like I didn't-the proper color of this fluid should be more like ginger ale, not sludgy thick green vegetables.) To be on the safe side, I started diffusing a blend of essential oils for immunity boosting in the coop. I set up the diffuser in a nest box and blew it in on flock at night (I figured since it's not toxic it wouldn't hurt to dose everyone). I'm not sure if this contributed, but the mass stopped re-filling with fluid. It's still there, but not growing (or if it's growing, it's very, very slow). And Jessica is happy as a chicken three cups lighter. The chicken vet, based solely on photos from the phone, suspects that Jessica might have some kind of cancer. My surgical oncologist friend (with human patients), suspects something like a burst organ (unsure of which organs chickens have-she suggested gall bladder or spleen). Regardless, Jessica is happy and seemingly doing well. It's been two months now and she's not showing any signs of slowing down, although I suspect she will slow down, simply because she's over four years old and there's a growth on her belly that won't completely go away. But for today, Jessica is living the good chicken life and that's a reason to cheer. UPDATE: After the writing of this post, Jessica lived another year (and a bit more). When she died, it wasn't from her swollen abdomen, but from a raccoon attack in the middle of the night. During the year after I drained her abdomen, she lived a normal, happy life. Although the fluid pocket never completely went away, after repeatedly draining it for a couple weeks in the beginning, it went down to a manageable size and stayed that way. Prevention As with many things related to raising chickens, there are things completely out of our control. But over all proactive health practices will not only help safeguard against conditions such as Ascites, but will give your hens a healthier life in every area. Helpful practices include limiting feed intake (especially paying attention to protein and sodium levels), giving your flock space to move around (get enough exercise and fresh air), keeping the coop clean and with adequate ventilation, and possibly using essential oils when needed (and with caution). There have been some interesting studies done on the use of selenium yeast, flax seed oil, Vitamins C and E, Eyebright (an herb), Oregono essential oil and Brewer's Yeast helping with possible prevention of Ascites in chickens. Post Script on Treatment What I did for Jessica was drain the fluids to make her more comfortable used essential oils in a diffuser to help with strengthening her immunity. All that I had read said that she'd never recover, there was no treatment and that over time, her heart and other organs would begin to fail, her breathing become too labored, and she'd die. Of course, I didn't have an official diagnosis from an Avian vet, and admittedly, I make lots of guesses in the dark, based on what reliable information I can find and try to treat my flock myself. Please note that I am NOT a veterinarian, I don't have all the answers, and I am NOT advocating any sort of treatment plan for your animals. If there is a local Avian vet and it's something you can swing, I wholeheartedly recommend visiting them. If you do decide to treat your flock for anything on your own, please proceed cautiously and armed with as much reliable information as possible. There are a number of diseases that can cause a hen's abdomen to swell and none of them are good. In fact, I knew that most of those diseases were ultimately fatal, and the only reasons to work through a differential diagnosis was to determine how long Marissa had left to live and to see if there was anything I could do to reduce her discomfort and improve her quality of life in her remaining time. I consulted my usual books and on-line resources and came up with this list of possible afflictions.Chicken Diseases that Cause a Swollen AbdomenNature provided chickens with only one hole (it's called a vent or cloaca) and everything entering the world from the chicken enters through the same hole. Unfortunately, it's also the only way out. If a chicken gets sick, it has to go out through that hole. Infection, and it is bad news. An infected oviduct can fill up with pus mixed with all the components that normally would develop into eggs, including membranes, yolk, and bits of shell. This material can pass out of the hen, resulting in the appearance in the nest box of a smelly, disgusting object colloquially referred to as a "lash egg". This gunk can also build up to a point that it breaks through the oviduct lining and gets into the hen's abdominal (peritoneal) cavity where it creates a raging infection—a condition known as egg peritonitis. That's when you'll notice that your hen's abdomen is swollen and that she's standing and walking with her back-end low to the floor because of the discomfort and the additional weight of the accumulating fluid. Peritonitis is very painful, there are really no good treatment options and it is usually quickly fatal.Egg bindingSometimes fully formed eggs get stuck at the end of a hen's oviduct right where it empties into the cloaca. This can occur for a number of reasons, including the formation extremely large egg, or a hen's inability to push the egg out due to illness or obesity. Once an egg becomes stuck it forms a traffic jam as other eggs line up behind it. Eventually the hen's abdomen becomes swollen from unpassed eggs and as her center of gravity shifts, she develops a characteristic upright "penguin walk." If the hen can't manage to pass the egg causing the blockage, she will die.Ovarian cystsUnlike most animals, hens only use one of their ovaries - the left one. It is fairly common for the right, undeveloped ovary to form a fluid-filled cyst. Most of the time this right ovarian cyst doesn't grow beyond an inch in size, but sometimes it can grow much larger, and it sometimes can become so large that it fills the entire abdominal cavity. While a hen can live her entire life with a small cyst, if the cyst enlarges to the point that it is exerting constant pressure on the internal organs, it can be fatal.Extreme obesitySometimes those low-hanging tummies on our hens are just fat. Backyard chickens, after all, are often our pets. And sometimes we give our pets way too many treats. Fatty liver syndrome is common cause of death in obese hens. The liver becomes enlarged, mushy, and can eventually rupture and bleed, causing immediate death. TumorsThere are a handful of viral diseases that cause tumor formation in chickens. Marek's disease is the most well known and the most common (see my post on Marek's Disease here). How common is this disease? The Merck Veterinary Manual states that "every flock, except for those maintained under strict pathogen-free conditions, is presumed to be infected." If your chickens have been vaccinated or are really lucky, they may have no symptoms even though they're carrying the virus. Symptoms are incredibly variable and dependent upon where tumors form. If tumors form in the liver, kidneys, or ovaries, abdominal swelling can occur. As the tumors enlarge, the chicken becomes lethargic, stops eating, loses weight, and ultimately dies.Ascites (Water belly)Ascites is a bit confusing, because unlike the other conditions listed here, it is not a disease per se, but a condition. "Ascites" simply means that a chicken is accumulating lots of abdominal fluid due to any number of causes. Here are the main ones:Heart failure: If a chicken's body needs more oxygen than its heart and lungs can provide, the heart works harder to pump more blood. If this happens continuously, the heart muscles enlarge and can become so thick that the heart valves can no longer close. Then blood backs up and pools in the liver. The increased pressure in the liver caused by the pooling blood causes the liver to leak fluid, which drains to the lowest possible point in the chicken—the abdominal cavity, where it just sits and continues to build up. This is a common occurrence in meat chickens that have been bred to gain weight in an unhealthy and abnormally rapid fashion. It is not so common in laying hens.Oxygen deprivation: Chickens may be oxygen deprived due to lung infections, high altitudes, excessive dust in the coop, coop ammonia build-up due to poor sanitation, poor ventilation, obesity causing clogged arteries, or simply bad genetics. When chickens can't get enough air on a regular basis, the same cascade I outlined for heart failure initiates and the end result is the same—an abdominal cavity filled with fluid.Ovarian cancer: Laying an egg almost every single day takes its toll on hens in a number of ways. For one thing, high ovulation rates result in high rates of ovarian cancer in hens. Over 30% of hens develop ovarian cancer after two and a half years-of-age. The hard tumor surface can cause abdominal irritation which can result in fluid leakage and buildup. Marissa's Differential Diagnosis:The very fact that Marissa had been suffering all summer indicated to me that she didn't have an internal infection. It would have made her much sicker much faster, and she simply would not have survived. So, I ruled out egg peritonitis based on the fact that she was still living. I've had egg bound hens before and Marissa's condition didn't look like that. She was not penguin walking and I couldn't feel any obvious hard lumps. The absence of hard lumps also allowed me to rule out any obvious large tumors. And she simply was not fat. Except for her large squishy abdomen, she looked like a normal hen. But that abdomen was very large, and so very squishy! I was going with ascites. And I was going to the vet!Sometimes when my hens get sick, it's pretty obvious what's going on and I'm able to initiate treatment myself without a vet visit. Other times, a seemingly healthy hen goes rapidly downhill and dies in a matter of hours or days. Hens are prey animals thus do their best to mask their illness until the very end. In these cases, a trip to the vet is pointless. But Marissa was potentially afflicted with a chronic condition, and there were a few treatment options - not necessarily to cure this little hen, but definitely to ease her discomfort and improve her quality of life. So, I felt a trip to the vet was well worthwhile.A Visit to the Local Friendly VetIn early October, I put Marissa in a pet carrier and made the drive to the only vet in my area that deals with chickens. I gave Dr. B Marissa's history and he performed a quick exam. I was happy to have a diagnosis, and doubly happy that he confirmed that I had been on the right track. Then Dr. B performed a paracentesis to get rid of the overabundance of fluid in Marissa's abdominal cavity—simply a matter of inserting a needle into her abdomen and drawing off the fluid. He removed about 500 ml of fluid, over a pint! There was certainly a lot more than 500 ml of excess fluid in Marissa, but removing too much fluid all at once can cause a chicken to go into shock and can be fatal. But removing a pint made Marissa look a bit less like an over-inflated basketball, and I'm sure she felt a lot more comfortable. The fluid was thin, colorless, and almost clear, a confirmation that Marissa was not suffering from egg peritonitis, which would produce a thick, pus-like material. Dr. B explained that fluid originating in the liver should have a yellow cast, so he felt that Marissa was afflicted with an ovarian tumor.Then Dr. B inserted a small hormone implant in Marissa's breast muscle - a treatment that was completely new and surprising to me. Deslorelin is a hormone implant that is approved as a contraceptive for ferrets and dogs. It has been used off-label to stop birds from laying eggs, and recent research has also shown it to be effective in suppressing reproductive disorders in birds. I put Marissa back into her pet carrier and took her home knowing that she had been given the best treatment available for one little hen with ascites and an ovarian tumor. She spent the first few days after her visit to the vet in the chicken-rehab unit—a crate that I'd parked right next to the coop fence. Marissa's two best friends, Paulette and Nicky, spent most of their time on the other side of the fence keeping her company, a phenomenon I've seen time and time again when hens are sick. Chickens care about their friends.

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