

# Karen's KIND

## Caring for Chickens

### Health Checks

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#### PRE-CHECK

Before beginning the actual health check, it's a good idea to observe the individual without restraining them. Take a look at their behavior, activity level, general appearance, how they are standing, and how they are moving.

Each breed and individual will have different behaviors and "normal" isn't the same for everyone. However, as a general guide, a healthy chicken should:

- Be bright and alert (they do take naps during the day, but should be easily roused)
- Have a bright and upright comb, unless it is normal for a particular individual to have a slightly floppy comb – this applies mostly to individuals with a single comb or carnation comb
- Have clear, bright eyes
- Have smooth, flat feathers (with the exception of Silkies, chickens who have naturally frizzled feathers, or chickens who are molting)
- Walk evenly on both feet.
- Have clean feathers on their bum.
- Have a healthy appetite
- Stand upright – i.e. not hunching or having a tail pointing downwards.

#### PICKING UP AND HOLDING THE CHICKEN

Try not to chase the chicken as chasing causes stress. Lowering yourself down to their level and offering a little bit of food can help encourage them over to you! Some more nervous chickens may still actively avoid your grip, so they might require a bit more coaxing. Catching in twos can be helpful to minimise chasing.

Place your hands on the chicken, either one hand on each side of their body, keeping their wings against them, or put one hand in front of their chest to prevent them from darting forward, and then put one hand on their back to keep them still. Once the chicken is still, put both hands firmly over both wings and around their body. You can then lift them towards you so that one side is held firmly against your body. This will prevent them from injuring themselves or jumping away from you. It's okay if their legs are free as long as you have their torso and wings safely cradled. If the chicken gets a wing loose, put them down and try again. Flapping a wing whilst being held can result in a fractured wing!

**Always watch for signs of stress such as darkening of the comb and wattles or open-mouth breathing** and put them down if they are getting too stressed.

Be EXTRA careful with large breed chickens as the stress could trigger a heart attack.

## THE CHECKS

### 1) FEET and LEGS

- Check for any bumps, lumps, swelling, scabs, cuts, or pressure sores on both the top and bottom of the chicken's feet and toes. Early signs of bumblefoot include the skin on the foot pad becoming smooth, shiny, and/or red, so look closely for any of these signs. Individuals with heat, swelling, scabbing, or discharge should be evaluated by a veterinarian. Don't remove scabs unless you have been instructed to do so by a veterinarian!
- The chicken should have smooth and non-raised scales on their feet. Raised scales could be a sign of [scaly leg mites](#), though sometimes older individuals, especially large breed roosters, may develop slightly raised scales where their foot and the front of their leg meet.
- You can check a chicken's natural perching reflex on both feet by placing a finger under their foot and allowing the chicken to grasp it with their toes.
- Check their nails and spurs to ensure that they're at a normal length. If they are overgrown, the chicken may need them filed down by an appropriate person.
- If the chicken has a leg band, check that it fits properly and is not causing any issues.

### 2) VENT

The vent is located just below the base of the tail. It should be clean and moist (but not wet) and should be the same color as the rest of their skin. It shouldn't have any discharge, excessive amounts of fecal matter around it, nor should it be crusty, bloody, or dry. A dirty vent can be a sign of health issues and so will need to be investigated.

- Look for signs of mites, lice, maggots, or other parasites and check for wounds.
- Make sure the vent isn't irritated and that there is no prolapsed tissue. **A prolapsing chicken should be released down immediately.** In many cases, if there is just a small amount of prolapsed tissue, it may go back in once the chicken is set down, with no intervention needed. If this is not the case, or if there is more than just a very small amount of tissue prolapsed or if the prolapsed tissue appears unhealthy, a veterinarian will be required.
- It's good practice to always evaluate a hen's abdomen if you find that they have fecal matting under their vent, as this can be the result of a distended abdomen.

### 3) ABDOMEN

For this part of the health check, it's important to take the chicken's breed, sex, and egg-laying status into account, as these factors affect both the size and feel of a chicken's abdomen. We recommend that only caregivers with a significant amount of experience perform this check. They may be able to make an educated guess about a chicken's health based on the way their abdomen feels and then escalate any issues to a veterinarian.

When checking their abdomen, **be gentle**. There is a chance someone could have a fully shelled egg in their oviduct, and you do not want to break it.

Hens who are not laying (due to implantation, age, or season), should have a small abdomen. A hen who is currently laying may have an abdomen that is slightly distended and soft. A chicken's abdomen should never feel fluidy and, with the exception of an egg and possibly the gizzard, you should not be able to feel any distinct structures. A tight, fluidy abdomen could indicate a serious health issue like egg yolk peritonitis, reproductive tract cancer, or heart failure. Hard, movable masses or a distended belly that is rock-hard could be indicative of an impacted oviduct. If you feel thick or hard nodular structures that extend back into the chicken's body, you could be feeling unhealthy intestines resulting from an infection or cancer.

#### 4) WINGS

- The wings should be held close to their body, be generally symmetrical, and there should be movement in the wings' joints when they flex. A droopy wing can be a sign of a fracture.
- Make sure to check the area underneath their wings for lice and mites, as well as any injuries – this is a common place to find mounting wounds on hens.

#### 5) BREAST and KEEL

Different breeds can have very different body types but generally: You should be able to feel well-defined muscle on both sides of their keel. If your hand makes a “C” around the keel, you have a Chubby chicken and if your hand makes a V, you have a Very skinny chicken who may have some health issues.

Note: Hens rescued from battery cages often have curved and misshapen keel bones because the bone re-hardens while the hen is lying on a wire bottom floor.

#### 6) THE CROP

Be gentle when handling the crop. It might feel like a beanbag but can be very delicate!

When full after eating, a healthy crop will be slightly soft with some give, but not squishy or hard to the touch - essentially like a partially filled beanbag when gently pressed upon.

If the crop is empty during the day, it may be a sign that the chicken is not eating properly. If the crop is hard or filled with fluid, this could indicate a problem.

Be very careful when handling a chicken with a large fluid-filled crop, as they can easily regurgitate and then aspirate (inhale the regurgitated fluid into their airways). If the chicken has foul or sour-smelling breath, this also indicates possible crop issues (such as [sour crop](#), which is a fungal yeast infection that requires treatment). If the crop remains full and firm and they haven't eaten in a while (or overnight), the crop could be impacted (or blocked). You may find that a chicken's crop is mostly emptying its contents, but notice a small clump of something that remains in the crop for days. In these cases, there may be plant matter, feathers, or other indigestible materials in the crop.

#### 7) HEAD, NECK and MOUTH

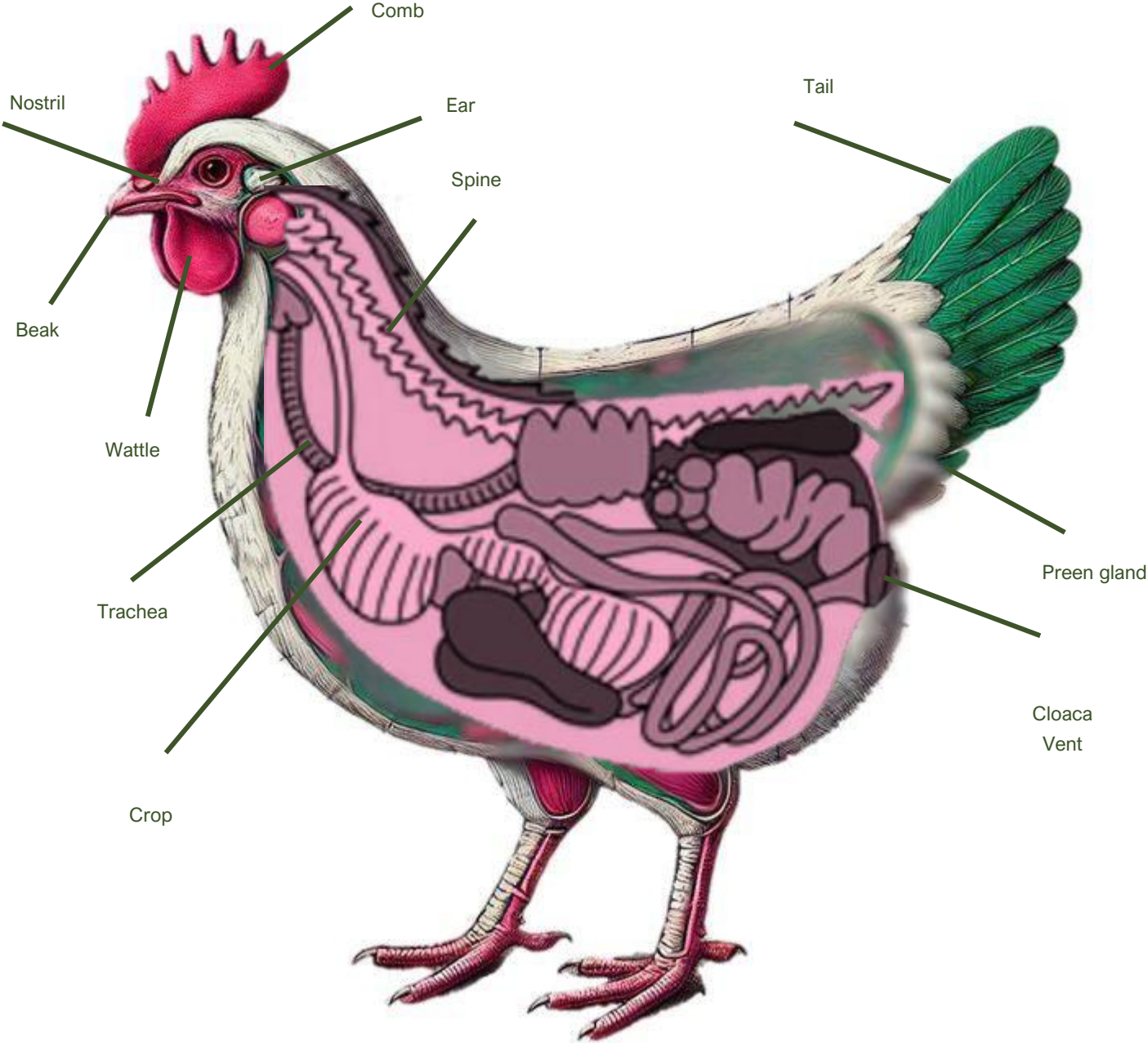
- The chicken should be able to hold their neck upright, extending vertically from their body. Drooping could be a sign of illness and holding their neck so their head is facing upwards could be a sign of a neurological issue.
- The comb and wattles should not be swollen, floppy, shrivelled or pale.
- Ears should not be swollen and the canal should not have any discharge or debris.
- The chicken should have wide open, clean, alert eyes. They should be clear and free of discharge. Cloudy, watery, dry, swollen, or crusty eyes could indicate illness or injury.
- Their beak should be smooth and free of cracks. In chickens who have not been debeaked, check if the top beak needs to be [trimmed](#). If their upper beak begins to grow much longer than their lower beak, it can interfere with eating, pecking, and preening. Chickens with crossed beaks may need to be watched with a closer eye.
- There shouldn't be any discharge or crustiness in their nostrils. Their breathing should not be labored, loud, wheezy, rattly, whistling, or squeaky.
- When you look inside their mouth, it should not be tacky or have excessive mucus. A sticky or tacky mouth could be a sign that the chicken is dehydrated. Their mouth should not have any ulcers, lesions, lumps, or areas of discoloration and their breath should not smell.

If the individual graces you with a poop during the health check, be sure to look at whether or not their droppings appear “normal” or potentially concerning.

### FINISHING UP

When you are finished with your check, carefully put their feet back onto the ground while continuing to keep their wings secure until you’re confident that they will gently leave you.

CHICKEN ANATOMY FOR HEALTH CHECKS





## PARASITES



Scaly leg mite



Lice eggs



Red mites

## PROLAPSE/ UNHEALTHY VENT



## UNCOMFORTABLE STANCE



## BUMBLEFOOT

