

Injurious pecking in turkeys



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What is injurious pecking?

In contrast to gentle feather pecking which is a social and investigatory preening of a turkey to another turkey, typically directed at debris on the plumage (Savory, 1995; Dalton et al. 2018), injurious pecking can cause tissue damage and mortality (e.g. Dalton et al. 2013; Duggan et al. 2014; Dalton et al. 2018). In fattening turkeys, injurious pecking is one of the main welfare and health issues (e.g. Bartels et al. 2020). It includes head pecking - an aggressive act targeted at the head, neck and snood of another turkey (e.g. Savory, 1995)- and severe feather pecking - repeated, forceful pecking and pulling of the plumage and/or skin of another turkey, with or without feather removal. Injurious pecking often results in plumage and tissue damage to the victim (Savory, 1995). Whereas head pecking is considered an act of aggression, the causes of severe feather pecking are multi-factorial (stocking density, group size, light conditions, diet...) although it is mainly re-directed highly motivated ground foraging behaviour in a barren environment lacking appropriate stimuli (e.g. Sherwin et al. 1999; Dixon et al. 2008; Dalton et al. 2018). Depending on the type of pecking, the body area targeted will differ. Aggressive pecking will target the head and neck area, whereas severe feather pecking will target the back and tail area (Leishman et al. 2022).

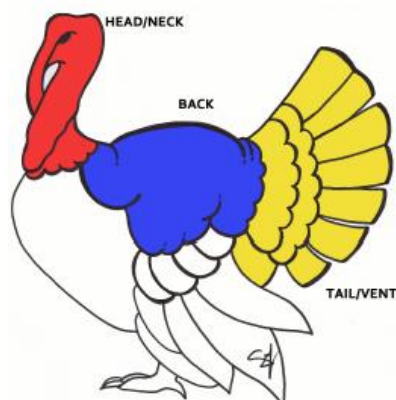


Figure 1: Body areas targeted by conspecifics in case of injurious pecking in turkeys (AWIN, 2015)



Legislation

There is no specific law protecting turkeys welfare. Their protection is therefore subject to the general indications dictated by the **Council Directive 98/58/EC**, which defines the minimum generic requirements for the protection of animals kept for farming purposes. **Council Directive 98/58/EC** sets down general standards. **Article 3** states that:

“Member States shall make provision to ensure that the owners or keepers take all reasonable steps to ensure the welfare of animals under their care and to ensure that those animals are not caused any unnecessary pain, suffering or injury.”



Method of assessment

The number of turkeys victims of injurious pecking in a flock could be assessed with the transect method. The birds are visually observed while the inspector slowly walks through the barn along longitudinal predetermined bands (transects) of equal width according to the house width (AWIN, 2015; Marchewka et al. 2015). The number of turkeys observed showing pecking injuries is then converted into a percentage of the flock. Vigilance is required with contiguous transects to avoid double counting the same birds.



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Aggressive pecking can be assessed by counting the number of turkeys with head and neck pecking injuries (figure 2); severe feather pecking can be assessed by counting the number of turkeys with back and tail pecking injuries (figures 3 and 4). The inspector may also count all the birds gathering both types of injurious pecking. The prevalence of turkeys suffering injurious pecking will be calculated as follow: number of birds showing one or more lesions described divided by the total number of birds on the day of the visit.

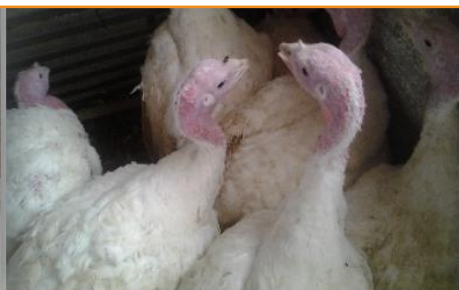


Figure 2:

Head and neck wounds: visible signs of injuries on the head area related to fresh or older wounds, including the head, beak, snood and neck (in red on Figure 1) (AWIN, 2015; Marchewka et al. 2015).



Figure 3:

Back wounds: visible fresh or older wounds, including bleeding wounds, between the end of the neck and the beginning of the tail (in blue on Figure 1) (AWIN, 2015). Wings' wounds can also be included (Marchewka et al. 2015).



Figure 4:

Tail wounds: visible fresh, older or bleeding wounds on the tail area, or on its sides, the vent is included when it is visible (in yellow on Figure 1) (AWIN, 2015; Marchewka et al. 2015).

AWIN 2015. AWIN welfare assessment protocol for turkeys.

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