

## Coccidiosis in Backyard Pullets

Special brooding practices are needed to ensure the success of coccidia vaccines. First, the birds need to be somewhat confined for about 28 days after they are purchased. This can be accomplished in a coup or in brood pens. After 28 days they can be allowed as much space as they require. Secondly, medicated feed or water medications that target coccidia cannot be used for the first 28 days so that the “vaccine” is not inactivated. Finally, the birds require some access to their own feces so that the “vaccine” will cycle. This requires that they re-ingest the “vaccine” oocysts that vaccinated birds are producing. If they are brooded on wire floors, brood paper should be used during the brooding period. If they are brooded in pens or on wood shavings, papers can be used under drinkers and feeders to give them the access they need.

One of the most common causes for sickness and possibly death in back yard chickens is the disease of coccidiosis. Coccidiosis is an intestinal disease caused by a protozoal organism known as coccidia. Birds ingest the “eggs” of the coccidia (known as oocysts) which can multiply in the lining of the intestines and result in severe enteritis. These oocysts can live in the soil and in chicken coups for extended periods of time and are probably in all environments where chickens are raised, so they are a constant source of infection each time new chickens are placed in that environment.

Coccidia “vaccines” have been incorporated in hatcheries to immunize chickens shortly after they are hatched. These “vaccines” can provide long term immunity against coccidia and eliminate the need for medicated feeds. Once the birds are immunized, pathogenic (disease causing) coccidia cannot multiply in the intestine and thus, the birds will be less likely to get sick and contaminate the environment with oocysts that could infect other birds at a later time. Coccidia vaccines are comprised of controlled numbers of oocysts that are not pathogenic (do not cause disease) to chickens. They multiply in the intestine (just like the pathogenic oocysts) and are excreted into the environment. The vaccine is then re-ingested by the birds as they scratch and peck at the ground. After approximately 28 days, the “vaccine” has cycled enough in the intestines to fully immunize the birds against coccidiosis.