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Introduction

Starve outs are those chicks that fail to consume food and so literally starve to death when their yolk reserves are exhausted. Yolk reserves are used up by day four or five and starve outs are characterised by an increased mortality at or just before a week of age with small, poor performing chicks. It arises because chicks were weak on placement and/or first week management failed to adequately encourage chicks to eat and drink.

Post mortem findings

Typically starve out chicks show pale/yellow livers, an extended gall bladder and a digestive tract, from crop to caeca, that is devoid of food. The yolk sac shows good yolk utilisation and is small and healthy (secondary infections can occur because these chicks are typically weak chicks).

Treatment

By the time this condition is diagnosed the situation has progressed too far for remedial treatment to be effective. Consideration may be given to humanely culling small chicks as these will be succumbing shortly anyway – but these can be difficult to catch!

Management needs to identify why this problem occurred and then do all it can to prevent its occurrence in subsequent hatches. Issues that can be looked at are early lay breeder flocks, old eggs, incubation problems, poor early chick management (especially of feeders and drinkers) and chick stresses.

Chick management on placement needs to focus on encouraging chicks to eat and drink. This includes easy access to feed and water being achieved by maximising opportunities, for example by placing feed on paper on the floor for the first few days and removing obstacles. In addition, feed and water wants to be palatable/potable and attractive to the chicks. For example, we do not want disinfectant residues in the water from the end of crop hygiene programme and we do not want stale food in front of the chicks. With regard to this last point, small frequent additions of feed to feeders/papers is much better than putting the first week's feed in the feeders and on the papers in one lot at the outset.

Supportive therapies such as vitamins and electrolytes in the water can be beneficial but you need to be sure that these are not just delaying the inevitable deaths that will occur. This is because, by definition, starve outs are consuming minimum amounts of water and, therefore, they will not be getting the benefit of anything added to the water. However, such inputs will benefit the rest of the flock because it should be remembered that starve outs are the extreme end of a spectrum and other chicks will be weak or depressed and benefit from such inputs.