Marek's Disease

SMALL FLOCKS COLLABORATIVE

Marek's Disease is a herpesvirus that causes lymphoproliferative disease in chickens, triggering uncontrolled growth of white blood cells (lymphocytes). The virus concentrates in feather follicles, spreads through feather dander, and can survive for months in bedding and on coop surfaces. Infected birds may develop paralysis, weight loss, or tumors, depending on how the disease progresses. Mortality can be high in unvaccinated flocks. Infected birds can shed the virus for life, making it hard to control. It is recommended to buy vaccinated chicks from trusted sources. Strong biosecurity and vaccination give the best protection.

Signs to Look For

1. Nerve Form

- Leg or wing paralysis (legs often in a "splits" position)
- Trouble standing or walking
- Trouble breathing
- Neck weakness

2. Skin Form

- Swollen/scabby feather follicles

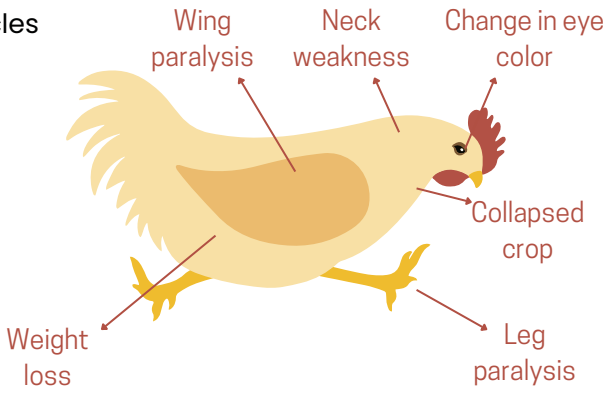
3. Organ Form

- Tumors in the liver, heart, kidneys, or other organs
- Weight loss
- Sudden death

4. Eye Form

- Cloudy or gray iris
- Uneven pupils
- Vision loss

Marek's disease can show up in different forms, or ways the disease affects the bird's body. **There is no cure and Infected birds may die or become life-long carriers and continue to shed the virus.**



Quick Facts

- Marek's disease is caused by a herpesvirus
- Can cause severe illness and sometimes death in chicken flocks
- Infections are rare in turkeys and game birds
- Does **not** spread to or infect humans
- Spreads easily and survives for months in dust, feather dander, coops, and equipment

Prevention

1. Buy Vaccinated Chicks

- Buy from trusted sources that vaccinate chicks.
- Vaccination helps prevent illness but does not stop birds from getting infected or spreading the virus.

2. Practice Biosecurity

- Always limit contact with birds from other flocks to prevent disease spread.
- Wear coop-dedicated shoes to keep out germs.
- Wash hands and keep coop/equipment clean.
- Limit visitors and require boot covers.

3. Separate New Birds

- Isolate new or returning birds away from your flock for at least 3 weeks and monitor for illness.
- Germs can spread before birds show signs.

4. Handle Healthy Birds First

- Care for birds in this order: young → adults → sick, to avoid spreading germs.
- Wash or sanitize hands and equipment between different bird groups.

When Birds Get Sick

1. Work with a Veterinarian

- Marek's is usually confirmed at necropsy.
- A veterinarian can guide you on what to do next.

2. Isolate Sick Birds

- Separate affected birds from the flock.
- Marek's spreads quickly once in a flock, so other birds may already be exposed. Monitor birds for signs of disease.

3. Don't Spread Disease

- Do not buy or sell birds during or after an outbreak.
- Even healthy-looking birds can shed this virus.

4. Clean and Disinfect Coop Area

- Clean out feathers, dust, manure, and bedding.
- Disinfect the coop, boots, equipment, and surfaces.

5. Manage a Flock Long-Term

- Keep the flock closed. If adding birds, vaccinate and isolate them from the affected flock.
- Minimize stress (crowding, poor hygiene, mixing ages) to reduce the impact of illness.