

Caring for birds



Budgies Cockatiels Cockatoos Finches Parrots



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“ *Birds have an inbuilt safety reflex that enables them to appear in good health until they are too sick to cope.* ”

Many people have had the experience of keeping their own pet bird, be it a single budgie or canary in a cage or even setting up a breeding colony of parrots in an outside aviary. Unlike a dog or cat, a pet bird has different requirements to keep them healthy and happy.

Birds have an inbuilt safety reflex we term the “preservation reflex” . This enables the bird to appear in good health until it is too sick to cope anymore. If a bird in the wild or even in a captive environment, appears to be unwell, other birds, even those it has been with for a long period of time, will see it as weak and start to pick on and even harm it.

So by not showing external signs of illness, the bird's system tries to repair itself without subjecting it to being picked on by others. The problem then comes to our trying to tell whether a bird is ill or not.

Visiting the veterinary practice with your bird

“Do not clean out your birds cage prior to your vet visit.”

In the veterinary surgery we tend to not see pet birds come in to be treated until they are very sick. This gives rise to the lower survival and treatment rate seen in birds in practice.

Many vets find it difficult to treat birds for this reason, and so we often refer clients on to a specialist bird vet if the health concern is severe or obscure. Birds are also hard to examine as they will stress very easily on handling.

Clinical examination of your pet bird will involve a lot more talking and history taking by our vets than often is done with a dog or cat. It is vital that we obtain as much information about the bird's age, gender, habitat, diet, companions and behaviour as we can because this will give us a better idea of the possible illness the bird has.

When bringing your bird into the practice please ensure that you do not clean out its cage. Vital information can be gained by examining the bird in its normal environment. We will check how your bird is hulling the seed, which vegetables they are eating and which they are leaving. Consistency and number of droppings can also tell us a lot about the health of the bird.

Make sure you can give us detailed information on your birds

Age

Gender

Habitat

Diet

Companions

Behaviour



Signs your bird may be unwell

Isolation

If in a colony with other birds, does the bird sit on perches with the others or segregate itself off to one area?

This can be due to an illness, or due to a dominance hierarchy where this bird is lower in the pecking order.

Fluffed up

Is the bird alert and reactive to sound and movement?

If the bird sits low on the perch, crouched down and the feathers are not smooth and flattened with the body, the bird may be trying to insulate itself using the air trapped between the body and the feathers. This is often seen as the “sick bird look”.

Closing its eyes

Does your bird sit with its eyes closed?

This is another “sick bird look” character. Birds tend to be alert and reactive to all stimuli and only sleep when they are safe. In a cage being observed, during the daylight hours, or in different locations like in a vet's consultation room, a bird should never look sleepy. The slowly closing of the eyes and waking again is a clear sign of sickness.

Tail bobbing

Does your bird ‘bob’ its tail up and down?

This occurs in birds with any type of respiratory compromise. Any breathing difficulty will show itself as a bird sitting on the perch and the tail going up and down. This is abnormal, as normal breathing does not need the tail to move.



Open beak breathing

Is your bird breathing with its beak open?



This is another respiratory sign. Birds should be able to breath normally through the nares (nostrils). Sticky, fluid material in the mouth is often due to infection. Birds do have a more complex respiratory system than animals that involves a series of air sacs. This means that when breathing, the air first is in taken in through the nares and down the trachea into the airsacs. From here the air moves to the lungs. This system of airsacs means that foreign material can be trapped in the airsacs and set up infection in here.

It is interesting to note too that birds do not have a diaphragm and so need to move their chest up and down to breath – a very important factor to consider when handling your bird.

Position on the perch

Which perch is your bird sitting on?

Birds normally sit upright on their perches in an alert stance. A sick or injured bird will use the perch to support its body and slump down onto it. A bird with an injured leg or foot may have only 1 foot gripped onto the perch and the other may be tucked up, or hanging off the perch.

Wing position

How is your bird holding its wings?

Wing position is a good indicator as to an injury. A bird should sit with its wings held tight to the body. The exception would be a bird that is fluffed up – trying to keep warm, or stressed out and open beak breathing with a respiratory problem. A wing sitting at an abnormal angle or position indicates an injury and must be examined to determine the extent of the injury. Common problems include fractures, feather breakage, blood quill injuries and feather picking self mutilation problems.





Feather picking

When people are stressed or bored we often bite our fingernails. The equivalent to this in birds is to pick at their feathers. Grooming is a natural process to keep feather quality at an optimum but overdoing it will cause damage to feather quills and the skin itself. As feathers regrow the feather picking bird will pluck these new down feathers out at the base and can cause bleeding and irreparable damage to the feathers.

It is natural for birds to molt but finding excessive amounts of feathers in a cage is a clue to start to examine your bird. Self mutilation will occur on the bird only in areas it has access to. This includes the body, wings and back. Feather loss on top of the head and neck can indicate another type of problem such as a nutritional, fighting, or parasite burden as these are areas the bird cannot get to themselves.

There are various ways to control the feather picking bird. One way is by placing an Elizabethan collar around the neck of the bird to stop it from being able to groom itself. If the problem is behavioural, we can stimulate the bird by providing new toys, natural perches, a new friend, food searching items and changing its normal routine. If all else fails, medically we can inject a hormone modifier that works well in some species.



“ *Make sure you worm your bird every 3 months* ”

Worms in birds

Parasites your bird is at risk of contracting are;

Threadworm (Capillaria sp.)

Caecal Worm (Heterakis sp.)

Roundworm (Ascaridia sp.)

Gape worm (Acuaria sp.)

Tapeworm (Raillietina sp.)

Worming your bird is a vital part of its healthcare plan. As in dogs and cats, regular worming every 3 months is recommended. Products available to do this are varied, some being safer to use than others.

It is important to consider how you are going to get the medication into your bird. In most cases, an in-water medication should be used. Birds of various species drink different amounts of water and individuals can vary on any given day due to the food they eat and the weather conditions. We can give you exact directions for the product you purchase from the practice. Our staff can help you choose the most effective wormer for your bird.





“ Mites in large numbers can cause illness in birds ”

Mites and Lice

Birds do carry lice in the feathers of the wings and body. These are generally an annoying parasite but in large numbers can cause birds to become lethargic, stop eating and lose weight, over-groom themselves and cause injury.

The most common mite is known as scaly face and leg mite. This mite burrows under the scale of the feet and into the cere tissue of the beak. It is very common in budgerigars. Other mites include the air sac mite – seen in finches. This mite causes the bird to continually wipe its beak on the perch and can cause a respiratory compromise.

Treatment can involve use of a mite and lice spray, a paint on paraffin oil based liquid or an in water medication of Ivermectin. Care must be taken to use products registered for use in birds as toxicity can otherwise occur easily in these delicate creatures.

Protozoa (parasites)

There are a number of obscure parasites that cause medical problems in birds. Trichomoniasis is a good example. This parasite is often found in the crop and faeces of budgies and pigeons. It will cause a bird to be weak, have diarrhoea and often vomit. It is spread from bird to bird directly by feeding young or each other, or by using the same feed and water containers. Treatment involves a powder used in the water daily for at least 7 days.

Viral, Bacterial, Chlamydial

Other infections will affect birds in all body systems – gastrointestinal, respiratory, skin and reproductive. Most infections are spread bird to bird via exudates like droppings and saliva but can be spread in feather down too.

Antibiotics are often prescribed to birds but only after a clinical exam, faecal exam and often a crop wash. These diagnostic tests allow us to prescribe the appropriate antibiotic for a sick bird. Without the testing we could actually cause more damage because birds do need a level of good bacteria in their systems to digest their food.

Most medications used are put into the water and changed fresh each day. The more common names of antibiotics appropriate include enrofloxacin, lincospectin and doxycycline.





Housing

Birds are a naturally free ranging species that need to exercise and search for their food in various places, rest in safe havens and have a degree of privacy to reproduce.

Domesticated species still have an innate behaviour that makes them regress to the wild situation. Often pet birds are kept in cages that are too small, or that do not give the bird the opportunity to exercise. Commercially made cages are usually more ornate than useful.

Ideally, a cage should be longer rather than tall as birds fly horizontally more so than vertically. If your current cage has more height than length, benefit can be gained by reducing the number of perches in the cage so that the bird needs to at least jump over to the next perch or better even to fly over. Perches can be at different heights in the cage and the food and water placed in different spots so the bird needs to move around during the day.

In an aviary situation, of course flight areas can be made available due to the cage size. Again, remember to separate feed stations, use limited numbers of perches, and use natural material for perches where available. Birds do feel a lot safer up high in a cage or aviary, so allow roosting perches closer to the upper limit of the cage. Ensure outdoor aviaries do have cover from prevailing winds and harsh sun. Many aviaries are now constructed with 1/3rd solid cover and 2/3rd exposed on top, with a solid cover down 1 or 2 sides as well.

The material used to construct the cage or aviary will be dependent on budget, breed of birds kept and whether it is indoor or outdoor. It is very important to ensure metal toxicity doesn't occur when parrots pick off pieces of metal from wire or toys. Many people wipe new wire down with a vinegar solution to remove the excess galvanization from the wire. Indoor cages don't tend to have the problem as wire is usually coated.

Metal poisoning does occur in parrots fairly commonly, due to eating metal from wire cages, chains off toys, bells and mirrors. A toxicity is seen as a sick looking bird, possible vomiting, often diarrhoea with blood in it. Some parrots chew more at things and are seen more with metal toxicity. The list includes sun conures and cockateils. Diagnosis is obtained by x-raying the bird and seeing the opaque objects sitting in the gastrointestinal tract. Treatment involves removing the toxic source, dosing with an injectable chelating agent and flushing out the metal.





Nutrition

Birds cannot live on seed alone!

Pet birds have lived on plain budgie seed and water for many years without any known clinical signs of problems being seen by their owners. This is not what happens though in the wild. Birds do graze across various environments. Seed quality changes throughout the seasons. Fresh sprouting green pick is available only at certain times in the wild. Breeding seasons are built around the nutrition available and the weather conditions. Many birds are not seed eaters, rather require pollen, and nectar.

Over time, pet food companies have poured millions of dollars and millions of hours into researching the best nutrition for pet dogs, cats and horses. Now some are starting to do the same for pet birds. For many years the pet bird market has not been large enough to support this research and hence we have just fed what we thought birds needed rather than known the best food to provide. Birds are creatures of habit and are hard to change from what they are used to.

The latest development is pelleted food that is more of a complete diet for pet birds. The problem though is that adult birds see the pellets as something different and do not attempt to eat it. The solution lies in starting off new chicks on these types of food and getting them used to it at an early age.

In older birds we can provide additional supplements to our birds in the form of fresh fruit and vegetables, sprouting seeds, live food if appropriate and flowering native plants. Each species has a particular requirement. Artificial in water supplements can be used too, such as in products like vitamin and mineral powders.

Birds with nutritional problems will present in various states. Clinical signs can be as minor as weak feather growth with splits in feather growth or colour changes, up to anorexia, liver disease, reproductive disorders and gastrointestinal problems. As we know, nutrition is important in any animal to help prevent disease and also fight off infection, so a fully balanced diet can only be of benefit to our pet birds.





In short, if your bird is showing any signs of illness, please make an appointment with our vets as soon as possible.

By recognising the signs of illness as detailed in this book, and quickly seeking veterinary attention, you will greatly increase your bird's chance of recovery.

