



# Avian Health Care

## HEALTH EXAMINATIONS

As with any other pet, preventative medicine is very important in companion birds.

Many diseases are known to occur and more are being discovered all the time. Bird owners must be vigilant to keep their birds healthy.

Birds often hide signs of illness as a protective mechanism. In the wild, a sick bird often becomes a meal for a predator. A flock will often distance themselves from the sick bird because it attracts predators. For this reason, it can be

difficult to catch problems early, before they become life-threatening. Annual examinations and laboratory analysis are the basis of preventative health programs in birds.

The first step of this process is a thorough review of the bird's history and husbandry. During this step, the veterinarian can detect many conditions or potential problems. The bird is then observed at rest. The droppings are also examined. The droppings contain feces, urates, and



urine. Gross examination and cytology can be a wealth of information regarding health.

Finally, the bird is gently restrained and examined in detail. The eyes, nose, ears, beak, mouth, crop, muscles, abdomen, limbs, skin, and feathers are all inspected for signs of problems.

## GETTING BELOW THE SURFACE

Even with a thorough examination, some problems can escape detection. About 20-25% of birds that look normal have an underlying problem. In order to better detect these, additional diagnostics are necessary.

A complete blood count can help determine if the body is

fighting infection, or if a bird is anemic.

Blood chemistries evaluate the liver, kidneys, pancreas,



muscles, and blood sugar and calcium.

Cytology can detect potentially harmful organisms in the feces or respiratory tract.

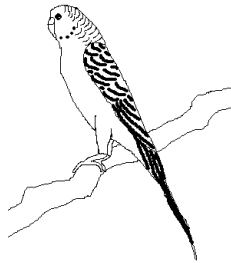
Fecal examinations can also reveal parasites that can harm a bird.

## RECOGNIZING WARNING SIGNS

Birds are very good at hiding signs of illness. In order to survive in the wild, birds must appear healthy. If they exhibit signs of weakness, they will be easy targets for predators. Therefore, the instinct to mask symptoms is very strong. Early recognition of illness requires astute observation by the owner.

### Posture

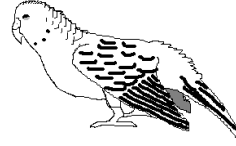
Birds should have an upright stance, tightly folded wings, and a straight tail. Resting birds may



hold one leg up or tuck the beak under the wing.

### Behavior

It is very important to take any behavior changes seriously. While some of these changes may be perfectly normal, others may not. Learn the normal behaviors of birds by reading, watching them, and talking to other bird owners. This will help minimize false alarms. Specific behaviors to watch for include inactivity, ruffling of the feathers,



A bird that looks like this could be in real trouble.

excessive sleeping, shivering, or lack of interest in normal activities. Incoordination, weakness or seizures are serious clinical signs and should prompt immediate medical attention. If you are unsure about a particular behavior, call your veterinarian immediately.

### Eyes

The eyes should be bright, clear and alert. There should be no discharge or redness. Birds with a problem in one eye will often face the opposite eye toward you.

## DROPPINGS

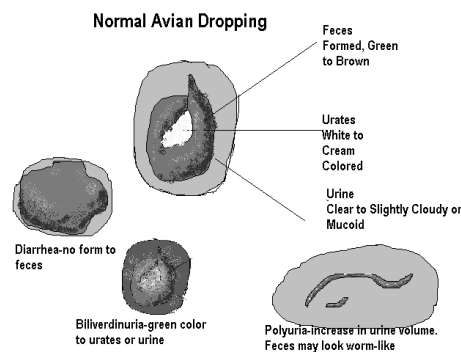
Droppings are a good indicator of a bird's health. The normal dropping consists of feces, urates, and urine. Alterations in any of these may indicate a problem.

A decrease in the number of droppings, or if the droppings consist only of urates or urine,

the bird is probably not eating. Diarrhea usually indicates an intestinal problem. The color of the feces may change with the content of the diet, especially with colored pellets. Green urine or urates often suggest liver problems. Polyuria (increased urine volume) can

be caused by numerous problems.

The best way to monitor these changes is to use paper to line the floor of the cage. It is also very important that these papers are changed daily. Any change should be reported to your veterinarian.



## QUARANTINE PROCEDURES

Quarantine is a word that for many people holds negative connotations. However, if used properly and consistently, it is the most powerful tool that bird owners can use to protect their birds. Breeders and owners should approach a new bird with a certain amount of caution. It could potentially wipe out the whole flock. Also, any bird that leaves the flock and is exposed to other birds (e.g. at shows) becomes a "new" bird because it may be bringing back a whole host of disease organisms. Quarantine should not be optional. All birds can be subclinical carriers of any disease.

The definition of quarantine is **isolation** of the new, recently moved, or sick bird from the remainder of the collection. This means avoiding indirect as well as direct contact between the two groups. Ideally, the quarantined birds should be housed in a completely separate building or at least

make sure that there is no passage of ventilated air from the quarantine area to the main collection. At minimum, the new bird should be isolated in a separate room (or floor) of the house. The quarantined area should be cared for by a separate person if possible. Protective clothing should be worn with the quarantine birds and they should always be cared for *last*. No common usage of cages, dishes, or other supplies should occur. Basically, anything that comes in contact with quarantined birds should never come in contact with established birds.

The length of time to keep a bird in quarantine is variable. The minimum time should be 45 days with the maximum of 6 months. The longer the time the less likely the bird is carrying or incubating disease.

Prior to release from quarantine, birds should be evaluated for general health

and various diagnostic tests performed. Fecal examination, complete blood counts, cytology, and chemistry panels



may be advisable. Screening for specific diseases that are common in geographically or in certain species of bird may be useful. Tests are available now for psittacosis, polyomavirus, psittacine feather and beak disease, and others.

The quarantine period should also be used to acclimate new birds to the owner's diet, climate, and maintenance procedures. Quarantine is a technique used to control outbreaks of contagious disease, but is also the single most effective way of preventing them.

## WHAT TO DO IF YOU SEE SOMETHING

*Don't let the sun set on a sick bird.*

While we still see healthy birds for wellness exams, we are no longer equipped to treat a sick bird. With birds' ability to mask the signs of illness, the onset of

any noticeable signs may occur when the problem has reached a critical level. If your bird is sick or injured, you need to call the University of Illinois Small Animal Clinic and Emergency Service.



It is unwise to adopt a "wait and see" approach. If you are unsure, please feel free to call our clinic.

### ***Important Numbers***

- University of Illinois Small Animal Clinic and Emergency Service: 217-333-5300
- National Animal Poison Control (A consultation fee will be applied): 1-888-426-4435

## PSITTACOSIS

Psittacosis is a serious infectious disease of companion birds. Clinical signs may not be seen in some birds. Those showing signs can exhibit upper respiratory symptoms, conjunctivitis, hepatitis or generalized infections. One of the reasons this disease is so important is that it is ZONOTIC --



Birds in close contact with people should be screened for psittacosis.

contagious to humans. Birds that have close contact with people should be screened for this disease. This is especially important if a person in the household has a compromised immune system.

None of the tests available are perfect for all situations. Some

detect the presence of the causative organism, *Chlamydia*, while others detect the antibodies the bird makes in response to the organism. For routine screening, the antibody tests may be the best type. For acutely ill birds, tests detecting the organisms may be better. If this disease is highly suspected, it may be advisable to perform both tests.

## PSITTACINE BEAK AND FEATHER DISEASE

Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease (Pbfd) is a serious contagious viral disease of parrots and cockatoos. As the name suggests, the disease attacks the feathers and beak. Affected birds are highly immune suppressed and often die of secondary infections. While the disease affects Old World parrots more than New

World parrots, it has been found in a variety of species.

By testing and separating infected birds from other susceptible birds, the incidence of this disease has been greatly reduced. New birds of species originating from



Africa, Asia, and Australia should be screened for this disease. Other birds going into homes with these types should be screened also.

Birds that are positive but showing no signs should be isolated and retested in 3 months. Many will clear the virus and be normal afterward.

## POLYOMAVIRUS

Polyomavirus is a disease that affects primarily baby birds. Adult birds may transiently become slightly ill, but often it is not noticed. Affected baby birds can die suddenly without any clinical



Polyomavirus affects baby birds most severely.

signs. A diagnosis is usually made at necropsy (autopsy).

There is a test available. It is recommended to test all birds going into breeding collections be tested

so that they do not present a risk to the offspring. Vaccination is another means of protecting birds from this virus. Breeding birds should be vaccinated annually and chicks at 5 and 7 weeks, prior to contact with other birds.