

# Signs of Illness in Companion Birds

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Wild birds disguise signs of illness to avoid predation and harassment. This ability is retained in pet birds, so we must watch out for subtle changes. Note each change because a bird that can no longer conceal its illness may be seriously ill. It is better to investigate minor problems early than to wait until a bird is on the bottom of the cage with ruffled feathers and partially closed eyes. By then it could be too late.

The goal of this web page is to describe early signs of illness in birds and help people act in time for early treatment. Regularly scheduled health check-ups that include routine blood and fecal testing can also help catch problems early.

See your avian veterinarian immediately if you see these emergency signs of illness:

- Anorexia, not eating for 12 hours or more
- Bite wounds (dogs, cats, ferrets, other birds)
- Bleeding
- Bluish discoloration to white skin or pink membranes
- Bright green droppings
- Burns
- Decreased activity or change in daily routine of activity
- Drooping wing or wings
- Enlarged eye or eyes
- Exposure to toxins including cooking vapors and volatile scents
- Eye injuries
- Head tilt or walking in circles
- Head trauma
- Inability to perch
- Lack of appetite
- Lameness or limping
- Lying down
- Noticeable chest excursions
- Open-mouth breathing
- Pink or brown tissue protruding (prolapsed) from vent (between the legs)
- Red or black droppings

- Regurgitation
- Ruffled (puffed out) feathers
- Seizures
- Sitting on bottom of cage
- Sleepiness
- Squeaking or wheezing on each breath
- Sunken eye or eyes
- Tail, head, or wings bobbing with each breath
- Vomiting
- Weakness

Make an appointment to see your avian veterinarian soon for these problems:

- Abnormal color to the droppings
- Beak abnormalities (that do not restrict eating)
- Excessive egg laying
- Excessive grooming or feather plucking
- Feather abnormalities
- Nasal discharge
- Skin parasites
- Sneezing
- Swollen belly
- Tumors or swellings
- Undesirable behaviors such as screaming or biting
- Undigested feed in the droppings

Many people believe that birds are frail creatures that will die if exposed to the slightest draft of air. This may be true for birds that are poorly nourished and living in stressful conditions, but healthy, well-nourished pet birds are quite hardy and can tolerate a range of environmental conditions. In fact, many successful keepers maintain their pet birds outdoors year-round in warmer regions of North America.

Most pet owners vigilantly look for illness in their beloved companions. People can usually tell when dogs and cats are sick, but sometimes illness is not so easy to recognize in birds. By the time signs of illness are obvious, the disease can be quite advanced. At this point even the most advanced veterinary medicine may not be successful.

We can assume it is not negligence that leads to a delay in seeking treatment. Instead, it is more likely that many people are unfamiliar with the subtle signs of early disease in birds. Start by paying close attention to your bird's normal lifestyle. For the first few

weeks, record your bird's daily activities in a logbook organized by the hour. Once you are familiar with normal activity, attitude, posture, appetite, vocalizations, routines, and droppings, then you can begin to notice changes from the norm. This forms the basis of your health surveillance program. Next, purchase a digital gram scale (available at



many local and online bird supply retailers) and weigh your bird once or twice a week first thing in the morning before breakfast. Sudden changes in weight are a sure sign of problems. Keep weight records in the logbook so you can monitor trends that change slowly over time.

Feathers - A healthy bird is bright-eyed and alert, with clean, sleek, nicely preened feathers held close to the body.

Sick birds sometimes ruffle (puff up) their feathers for extended periods of time, often even when they are stimulated. Ruffled feathers trap a layer of warm air around the body and help the bird fend off a chill. Sick birds might also partially close their eyes and appear sleepy during times of day when they are usually wide-awake. A bird that huddles on the bottom of the cage with extremely ruffled feathers is critically ill.



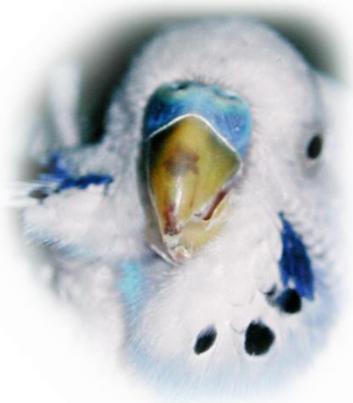
Dirty tattered feathers may indicate malnutrition, metabolic disease, a lack of preening due to illness, mechanical damage due to poor housing, or emotional distress. Staining of the feathers above the nostrils indicates nasal discharge. Pasting of feathers to the head and face usually occurs with vomiting. Droppings stuck to the feathers around the vent could indicate an intestinal tract disease or abdominal enlargement.



Posture - A bird should maintain an erect position on the perch, weight evenly distributed on the feet, wing tips crossing over the back, and tail feathers in a direct line with the back. Sick birds may sit with one or both wings drooped and the tail directed downward. A bird that has its tail directed downward may have respiratory tract disease or abdominal discomfort. Tail bobbing or tail flicking indicates increased respiratory effort.

Unsteadiness on the perch, wobbliness, and low posture are also serious problems. Birds with severe respiratory or abdominal disease may hold their head low, in a horizontal or hunched position on the perch. Restlessness, shifting of body weight, or favoring of one leg may indicate pain or lameness due to disease or injury. In budgerigars, paralysis or weakness in one leg can be caused by tumors in the abdomen.

Attitude and activity level - Changes in a bird's attitude may indicate a problem. Take notice of decreases in activity, playfulness, talking, or singing. Personality changes can also signal illness. Examples include 1) a usually aggressive bird suddenly becoming passive, or 2) a normally friendly bird suddenly becoming aggressive or irritable and wanting to be left alone.



### Beak

The beak grows constantly and should wear down with normal activity. On rare occasion normal wear does not occur and the beak must be trimmed. Acquired malocclusion, or wry beak, is one condition where normal wear does not occur. Changes

in beak quality and growth rate could, however, indicate disease. For example, in budgerigars with fatty liver disease the beak overgrows, deteriorates, and black/brown



spots of hemorrhage occur. Do not be fooled into thinking an overgrown beak is strictly due to a lack of chewing behavior. Keep an eye out for unusual crusts, scales, or enlargements around the beak and mouth.

#### Feet and legs

Infections of the feet occur despite precautions. Pressure sores on the bottom of the feet may develop from improper perch size and could lead to bumblefoot. Keep the perches clean, vary the sizes, and provide soft or non-rigid perches. Seek veterinary care if you notice lameness, weight shifting, redness, swellings, or sores on the feet/legs.



Identification is the sole purpose of a leg band. It should be removed in pet birds to prevent problems, and a microchip can be inserted beneath the skin if permanent identification is desired. Leg bands commonly cause skin irritation or injuries that can include fractures and dislocations when the band becomes caught on an object. If the leg band is necessary for international travel or breeding, check it daily to ensure free movement without irritation to the underlying skin. Unusual crusting and flaking on the legs may indicate a nutritional or parasitic disease that should be evaluated by an avian veterinarian. Please take extreme care whenever applying cream or ointment to a bird. Never apply ointments or oils to the feathers because they will spread and destroy the insulating properties. Use ointments sparingly on the feet and legs, preferably under the guidance of a veterinarian.



#### Respiratory tract

Birds normally breathe with very little effort. Noticeable effort, either at rest or for prolonged periods after exercise, can indicate a problem. Signs of respiratory effort can be difficult to interpret; watch for movement of the tongue, beak, breast, and tail during breathing. Tail bobbing and tail flicking are common signs of respiratory difficulty in

birds. Abnormal noises produced while breathing can include clicking, wheezing, squeaking, or frequent sneezing. Healthy birds breathe with no noticeable sound.

Upper respiratory tract infections are common in pet birds. Nasal discharge may appear as fluid in the nostrils or staining of the feathers above the nostrils. Conjunctivitis is characterized by discharge around the eyes with swollen, reddened eyelids. Frequent blinking or partial closing of the eyes for prolonged periods may indicate early signs of conjunctivitis. If the condition progresses into sinusitis, there can be swelling around the eyes. It is important to recognize respiratory disease early in birds because their pus is not liquid; instead, it becomes thick, hard, and cheese-like. Pus that builds up in the sinuses and air sacs can be very difficult to remove and might require surgery.



A bird that is gasping for breath and breathing with an open mouth is extremely ill and must be handled with extreme caution. Not all birds with respiratory distress have a respiratory tract infection. Common problems include 1) fungal infection of the airways, 2) choking on inhaled food particles, and 3) a space occupying mass in the abdomen that prevents full expansion of the air sacs and reduces airflow through the lungs.

Severe respiratory distress can cause cyanosis, which is noted by a color change in the skin of the face, legs, and beak from pink to gray-blue. Keep in mind that some birds, including budgies, have normal blue skin pigmentation in these areas.

A rhythmic, high-pitched squeak is sometimes heard in budgies with goiter. The squeak is caused by pressure from the enlarged thyroid gland on the voice box (syrinx) and windpipe (trachea). The enlarged thyroid gland is inside the chest cavity and usually cannot be identified without diagnostic imaging.

### Digestive Tract

Food Consumption – Birds must eat well to sustain their rapid metabolic rate and body condition will deteriorate rapidly with anorexia. Check each day to ensure your bird is eating, and if so, how much. A bird may pick at the food cup without actually eating. It is important to determine whether the seeds are have been hulled or if they are just being scooped out of the dish onto the floor of the cage. Sometimes a bird may hull the seed but not ingest it. Check the seed cup and bottom of the cage for seed hulls and hulled seed that has not been eaten. Clean the cage floor and empty/refill the food dishes daily to monitor appetite. Offer only as much as the bird will eat in a day.

Hulled seed on the bottom of the cage could be due to regurgitation, vomiting, or hulling without eating. Regurgitation is a normal part of the courtship behavior. Birds may court toys or mirrors, leaving regurgitated seeds on or near them. The bird may even regurgitate to people in a courtship gesture. Vomited seeds, however, usually form sticky clusters throughout the cage - often adhering to the cage bars. The head feathers of a vomiting bird are often pasted together with vomitus, which can be mixed with seed.



Grit used to be controversial. Today we know that few pet birds need grit, and it is more likely to cause problems than it is to ease digestion. It can be offered to doves and pheasants in small quantities because these species do not hull their seeds. Granite grit should never be offered to finches, canaries, or birds in the parrot family (psittacines). Oyster shell grit, however, is an acceptable calcium source for all laying birds. Sick birds, especially those with gastrointestinal disease, tend to gorge on grit, causing impaction or blockage. It is easy to be fooled into believing that a sick bird is eating, when in fact it is consuming only grit. If grit is provided, excessive consumption should be considered a problem.

Water consumption- Some birds may not appear to drink a large amount of water but they do require a clean, fresh source that is changed at least once a day. Birds that suddenly start to drink excessive amounts of water may be suffering from a metabolic disorder, kidney disease, or a digestive tract disturbance. Get a feel for daily water intake. No need to measure the exact amount consumed, just notice when the cup is less full than it normally has been and whether the droppings have become more watery. Keep in mind that some birds use their drinking cup for bathing, which will also use up some water.



Evaluation of the droppings – Bird droppings include both feces and urine. They are a useful indicator of a bird's health. Changes in the quantity or appearance of the droppings may be an early sign of problems. Start by getting a feel for what is normal for your bird. Use papers on the bottom of the cage and change them daily. The number of droppings per day should be fairly consistent; a decrease in number might indicate reduced appetite and should alert you to a potential problem. As

an example, healthy budgies usually pass about 30 to 40 pea-size droppings per day.

The appearance of the droppings should remain consistent depending on the food consumed. Changes in the droppings without concurrent changes in the diet could indicate a problem.

Cage bottoms should be lined with paper and changed daily so that droppings can be easily observed and counted each day. Wood shavings and ground corncobs, though convenient and aesthetically pleasing, disguise the character and number of droppings, which prevents you from taking advantage of this valuable monitoring tool. Furthermore, few people change these products daily, so food, droppings, and water mix to promote growth of bacteria and fungi.



Many cases of fatal fungal infection have occurred in birds that are kept with wood shavings or corncobs on the bottom of the cage. People who choose to use these products (against all advice) must make special effort to check the droppings daily and perform frequent cleaning.

A normal dropping consists of three basic parts: a formed fecal portion, an off-white urate portion, and a liquid urine portion. The fecal portion is usually green in seed eating birds because seed imparts no color to the droppings and the green color of bile predominates. Birds that eat other foods have a different colored fecal portion. For example, birds that eat dye-free pellets have light brown droppings, whereas birds fed strawberries have red droppings. The consistency of the droppings will vary with the bird species and its diet. A bird that eats high fiber fresh foods including fruit and vegetables will have loose, watery droppings. Some pelleted diets, in addition to causing light brown droppings, may also induce increased drinking and more watery droppings characterized by a soft fecal portion and increased liquid urine.

A sudden change in the consistency and color of the droppings could indicate disease. Note the proportion of feces in the dropping. Birds that are not eating may produce a scant, dark green, mucous fecal portion with moderate amount of liquid urine and urate. It is common for birds to occasionally "urinate" only liquid urine and urate with no fecal matter, but there could be a medical problem if this predominates. Remember that although a reduction in the number of droppings or amount of fecal portion can

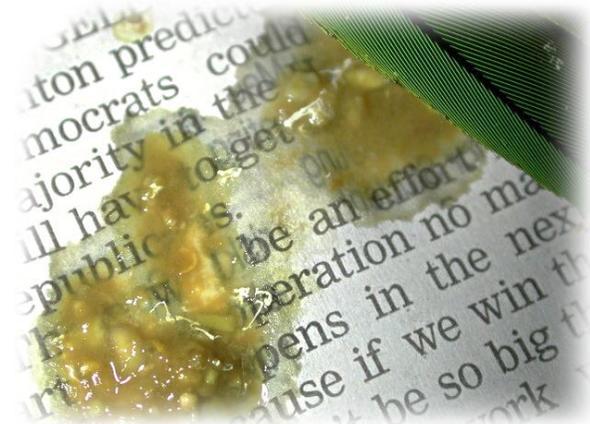
indicate poor appetite, it may also indicate interference with normal passage of food. Decreased droppings are frequently noted with vomiting.

Your avian veterinarian will carefully evaluate watery droppings in an attempt to determine whether they are a result of gastrointestinal disease or increased urine production (polyuria). Excess urine or urate may indicate disease of the kidney or a metabolic problem like diabetes. Urine and blood can be tested in an attempt to determine the cause of the problem so proper treatment can be prescribed.

Soft or liquid fecal portion of the droppings (diarrhea) is suggestive of a digestive tract disease. Occasionally, birds with an intestinal disturbance may have a gray coating on the fecal portion due to excess mucous. Pancreatic disease often causes characteristic "popcorn" droppings, which are bulky and off-white to pale gray. Undigested seed or grit in the droppings is a sign of maldigestion.



Blood in the droppings can be from the urinary, digestive, or reproductive tracts. Cloacal diseases including papillomas or other tumors can also cause it. Birds that stop eating will frequently bleed into the gastrointestinal tract and pass dark red to black feces. Bleeding can occur in female birds having difficulty passing eggs. Signs of straining (whether to pass feces or eggs) include repetitive lifting of the tail, wiggling of the tail, and squatting on the perch.



The urate portion of the dropping should normally be off-white in color. Dark yellow or neon green urates may indicate liver disease. Neon green urates can occur with psittacosis (infection with *Chlamydophila psittaci*). Blood in the urine or bloody urates (as opposed to blood in the fecal portion) could be caused by kidney disease or toxicity, particularly lead poisoning.

Unusual growths, swellings, and enlargements – Birds can develop abscesses, feather cysts and tumors, so any unusual swellings should be properly evaluated. Fat deposits can develop on the chest and/or abdomen and can be abnormal. Abdominal

enlargement could indicate the presence of a tumor or an egg. It can be difficult to detect an enlargement, so they are often not detected until quite large. Pay close attention for signs such as irregular displacement of the feathers or visible skin between the feathers. Early detection offers the best chance for successful treatment.

### Conclusion

Hopefully these basic tips will prepare you to identify early signs of illness your pet birds. Please contact your avian veterinarian immediately when you observe any of these signs, or when you have concerns about your bird's condition. Keep in mind that prompt and proper treatment will give a sick bird the best chance for recovery.

Annual physical examinations that include blood and fecal testing are an important part of your care. Ensure that newly purchased birds are examined either before or immediately after purchase to rule out underlying problems. Early disease detection is essential for successful management of pet bird health.