

PARROTS - HEALTH CARE

SIGNS THAT YOUR PARROT MAY BE INJURED OR SICK:

Despite the best efforts, birds sometimes become ill or injured. How do you know if your parrot is in need of medical care? Birds, like all prey animals, are good at concealing illness. It is up to the bird owner to know what to look for. Signs that something is seriously wrong with your parrot include weight loss; vomiting; laboured or abnormal breathing; a fluffed or huddled position; a loss of appetite or refusal to drink water; discharge from eyes, mouth, or nostrils; bleeding; signs of injury or swelling; or significant changes in your bird's disposition or behaviour. If any of these signs are present, seek immediate medical care for your pet. Other signs to watch for include favouring a limb; overgrowth of beak or nails; changes in eating or demeanour; sore or flaky skin; stained feathers around the eyes or vent, or dull and broken feathers. These are all signs of potential illness and require consultations with your avian veterinarian. Your bird's droppings are a key indication of its health. The stool will normally be green if your bird primarily eats seeds and brown if its diet consists mostly of pellets. Some fruits and vegetables will change the colour. The shape of your bird's stool should be coiled or semi-coiled. The liquid urates surrounding the stool are normally white and chalky when dry.

Changes in your bird's droppings can mean trouble. While an occasional loose stool is normal, diarrhoea can indicate a serious condition. Colour changes to either black or bright green, or stools covered with slime, are an indication that something is seriously wrong. If changes occur in the normally white urates, this is also a time to contact the veterinarian. Notify your vet if the droppings contain undigested seeds or food.

COMMON PARROT HEALTH ISSUES

The following are some of the diseases and other health problems that parrots (and other birds) may develop. Keep in mind, however, that the illnesses parrots are more likely to contract can vary according to their species and that there are many other potential illnesses than those listed here.

ASPERGILLOSIS

This is a fungal infection that causes respiratory distress and can be fatal to your bird. An avian vet can diagnose the disease, but it's difficult to treat and may require months of medication and treatment to cure. Signs of this illness include changes in your parrot's breathing or vocalization; gasping; or wheezing. As with most fungal infections, you can prevent or reduce the likelihood of aspergillosis by keeping your parrot's environment clean and dry, which will stop the growth of mold that causes the illness.

PSITTACINE BEAK AND FEATHER DISEASE (PBFD)

This is an incurable, contagious (to other birds) disease that causes feather loss and beak lesions in its later stages. A vet can diagnose it through blood testing, but PBFD is fatal, and

euthanasia is typically recommended after confirmation.

BUMBLEFOOT

This is an infection of the bottom of the foot that is associated with poor nutrition, lack of activity, and obesity in birds. The skin on the bottom of the foot may be inflamed and red and may become scabby, resulting in lameness. You can prevent this condition in your pet by providing perches with an uneven, bumpy texture and disinfecting the perches on a regular basis.

MITES

Air sac mites are common in finches and canaries. These parasites infest a bird's airway and cause a clicking sound when he breathes, eventually cutting off his air supply altogether. If your bird is laboring to breathe, breathing with his beak open, or you hear clicking when he breathes, contact your vet immediately. Scaly-face mites, or Knemidokoptes, are fairly common in young canaries and older birds with compromised immune systems. These mites cause a crusty appearance on the face and legs (more common on the legs and feet in canaries) and can result in an overgrown beak. A veterinarian can easily treat this condition.

Red mites are common in canaries, especially those kept outdoors. These mites consume blood and can substantially weaken their host. You can find these mites engorged with blood inside the cage early in the morning.

MEGABACTERIOSIS

A bacterial infection of particular concern recently is Megabacteriosis. It is thought to be an opportunistic pathogen and it is possible for some birds to be asymptomatic carriers. Budgerigars, lovebirds, cockatiels, canaries, and finches are susceptible. It is often a "wasting" disease affecting young birds. They will lose weight and die. Unfortunately it is usually diagnosed post-mortem by fecal stain or smears from liver or spleen. Sometimes birds infected with megabacteriosis will show blood in the feces. This is an example of an infection that is best prevented through proper sanitary practices, quarantine, and closed aviaries. Exhibition budgerigars are most at risk because they are most exposed to other birds. Showing birds is a very risky practice. In my opinion, frankly, quarantine is only partially effective in the case of many diseases since many birds can be silent carriers of disease, easily infecting your flock long after quarantine is over. Treatment has been successful in birds diagnosed quickly (within 24 hours of signs and symptoms). Symptoms include ruffled appearance, lethargia, weight loss, and blood in stools or around mouth, regurgitation.

PACHECO DISEASE

Pacheco's Disease is a highly contagious disease among parrots caused by a herpes virus. This virus attacks the liver and is fatal. Other than support care, no treatment is available for affected birds, but exposed birds can be given antiviral medication to help prevent the spread. There is no vaccination for Pacheco's Disease.

FEATHER PLUCKING

Feather plucking, while not a disease is a serious health problem common in parrots. The reasons a parrot plucks or chews its feathers are so complex, and the remedies so numerous, it is impossible to cover them and still address other health issues in this article. Nutrition, allergies, humidity issues, trauma, and a whole host of behavioural and social issues factor into feather plucking. Consult your avian veterinarian to talk about this problem if you notice your bird chewing or removing its feathers.

POLYOMA VIRUS

Polyoma Virus is of most concern to bird breeders, as it reduces fertility and is more deadly in chicks than adult birds. In adult birds, the virus manifests in liver disease, which can result in death, but most often causes only moderate illness. A vaccine is available for Polyoma Virus.

PSITTACOSIS/PARROT FEVER

Psittacosis or Parrot Fever is an infectious disease that is also contagious to humans. Affected birds show a variety of symptoms, including respiratory difficulties, weepy or runny eyes, sneezing, and congestion. Respiratory infections can prevent breathing. Psittacosis can also lead to liver disease and death. Psittacosis has the ability to incubate without symptoms for years, making it possible for an infected bird to appear healthy. Fecal tests are used to diagnose this disease, but birds shed the organism at intervals, so a test may fail to detect the disease. Both affected and unaffected birds can spread the disease-causing organism. When diagnosed, affected birds, and birds housed near them, are quarantined and treated with antibiotics. Humans infected with this disease usually show flu-like symptoms, but this illness can be much more serious in people with compromised immune systems. Because Psittacosis can be transmitted to humans, all cases of infections in birds must be reported to health officials.

PSITTACINE WASTING DISEASE

Psittacine Wasting Disease is believed to be viral and is seen most often in Macaws. The illness begins with vomiting and other gastrointestinal symptoms, and proceeds to overall weakness and rapid weight loss. Diagnosis is made through a biopsy of the stomach. This disease usually results in death.

FOOD POISONING & BACTERIAL INFECTIONS IN PARROTS

Yes, parrots can get food poisoning just like humans. You should use the same precautions in preparing their food as you would prepare food for human guests. Obviously, don't cut up their veggies on a cutting board where you recently cut raw chicken or other meats. One of the best disinfectants is Oxygene (which has stabilized chlorine dioxide). Use it to clean cutting boards and the like. One of the reasons I particularly like it is that it isn't toxic to humans or birds if any residue remains.

Use a fruit/vegetable wash like Vegiwash. It not only removes pesticide residues but can help remove any bacteria. Now this doesn't mean you should take out some smelly sprouted seeds and beans and use the special wash to make them "clean." Rotten food should be tossed. If you have ANY suspicion that a food is rotten (i.e., it doesn't smell quite right), trust your instincts and toss it. Obviously a couple of cedis worth of questionable vegetables is not worth your bird's health (or life for that matter). Any of the bacteria that contaminate foods and cause illness in humans can cause illness in parrots. Remember, vegetables and fruits can harbour *Escherichia coli* bacteria on the outer skins! You must wash canteloupe and other fruits THOROUGHLY before cutting into them. You can never know for sure if a neighbouring farm's cow waste has washed into the fields where they grew the fruits and vegetables you just stuck in your fridge. Some of these bacteria are lethal enough to kill your parrot.

The most common problems documented in parrots are the Enterobacteriaceae, such as Salmonellosis (most commonly due to *S. typhimurium*) and Coli bacillosis (due to *E. coli*). Human carriers of *Salmonella typhimurium* can infect companion birds. Other bacterial diseases to worry about are *Bordetella avium* (contaminated water), *Klebsiella pneumoniae* and *K. oxytoca* (resistant to many disinfectants; can be transmitted to humans), *Enterococcus faecalis* (common problem in canaries, causing respiratory infection), and *Listeria monocytogenes* (canaries most susceptible; rare but very deadly; recall the terrible, and fatal, outbreak in Switzerland some years ago due to contaminated cheese).

PESTICIDES AND PARROTS

Did you know that even organic foods have traces of pesticides due to what is called "drift?" Pesticides don't know to stop when they get to the boundaries of nonorganic farms and pass into organic farms! Did you know that most pesticides are NOT water soluble and cannot simply be rinsed off with water? A good vegetable/fruit wash can get off much of the residue, but still it is better to buy organic and use a special wash.

The most contaminated foods are strawberries, green beans, green peas, pears, HOT PEPPERS, and CARROTS. These are commonly fed to parrots. Wonder why you get dead-in-the-shell chicks? The least contaminated foods are potatoes, cauliflower, and tangerines. Unfortunately the cleanest of all were an avocado, which doesn't help us since they are toxic to many species of parrots anyway.