

# Health Examinations for your Bird

Pet owners are accustomed to taking their family dog or cat to the veterinarian for an annual check-up. It is even more important for pet birds to have regular examinations, because birds tend to hide symptoms of disease much more effectively than do other pets. A perfectly "normal looking" bird may actually be developing some health problem that may not be evident until the disease process is well established.

## New Bird Examinations

An examination of a newly purchased bird within the first three days after purchase is recommended in order to protect the investment of the owner, to uncover and prevent possible disease conditions, and to educate the owner about appropriate bird care. Even if the new bird checks out "normal", it is valuable to have results of diagnostic tests in the initial record of the patient to provide references for subsequent examinations.

## Quarantine

In order to protect other birds on the premises from being exposed to a potential problem, it is advised that all newly acquired birds be maintained separately for a period of at least six weeks following purchase. Since many air-borne viruses may be spread from room to room by central air conditioning or heating systems, an off-premises location is preferred. Quarantine is essential for all new birds, even those found "normal" on the postpurchase exam.

## Annual Checkups

Because of the lack of symptoms in the beginning stages of disease in birds, an annual check-up is advised for early identification and management of potential disorders. Owners are often unaware of the early signs of illness. Also, new information of interest to the pet bird owner is continually becoming available

## Components of the Health Examination

**History** - Your veterinarian is very interested in what you know about the background of your bird - its age, sex, origin, length of time in the household, diet, caging. Even if the bird has been a household pet for a long time, the veterinarian should be advised of any contact, direct or indirect, with other birds. Examples of indirect contact would be the owner's buying of bulk seed from open bins in a pet shop that houses birds, or visiting other aviaries, bird shows, or bird marts.

**Physical Evaluation** - From an initial, critical observation of the bird in the cage, the veterinarian can determine the general body conformation (obesity, tumors), posture, attitude and character of respiration.

Although many internal problems may not be evident from a step by step, hands-on examination, an experienced avian veterinarian will be able to note abnormalities in feathers, skin, beak, eyes, ears, cere, nares, oral cavity, bones, muscles, abdomen and vent. **Weight** - Once a bird has become an adult, the weight should remain relatively constant. Checking the weight occasionally, especially at the annual examination, will give valuable information about your bird's health. A pet bird's weight should be measured in grams, not ounces. Significant, life-threatening weight loss could take place before it is noticed in ounces.

## Specific Testing Procedures

Depending on history, results of physical examination, species, age and general condition, your veterinarian may suggest some of the following diagnostic techniques that will assist in evaluating your bird's health: Health Examinations For Your Bird

### Appraisal of Droppings

The appearance of the droppings - volume, colour and composition - on the bottom of the cage may help the veterinarian to generally assess the bird's health and to consider certain disease conditions. Most birds are nervous in the clinic, and their droppings may be abnormally loose. A faecal sample may be examined microscopically to determine the presence of internal parasites.

### Psittacosis Test

A screening test for psittacosis, or parrot fever, is important as part of the new bird exam or annual check-up because the causative agent, *Chlamydia psittaci* may be transmitted from birds to humans.

### Radiographs

X-rays may be used to assess the internal condition of your bird. The presence of old or new fractures, the size and relative relationship of internal organs, the presence of foreign bodies or soft tissue masses such as tumours, and the condition of lungs and air sacs are often evaluated with radiographs.

### Blood Tests

A blood sample might be taken to determine the amount and distribution of blood cells. This information may suggest the possibility of certain diseases, and further tests may be indicated for confirmation. A series of chemistry tests performed on the blood sample may point to imbalances in biochemical functions and suggest the possibility of organ dysfunction. Blood parasites may also be detected.

### Microbiology

Based on results of Gram's stain, your avian veterinarian may recommend a culture of the choana (throat), cloaca (vent), crop or some other tissue/fluid sample to determine abnormal overgrowth of bacteria or yeast. At the same time, antibiotic sensitivity discs may be used to determine an appropriate antibiotic to be used if the bacterial growth requires therapy.

### Cytology

With the use of special stains, a veterinarian skilled in this procedure can evaluate smears of tissue or fluids to assist in diagnosis.

### Virus Screening

Some new tests are currently being developed to screen birds for certain viruses. The detection of viruses is especially important for aviary birds. Some viral agents do not express themselves as clinical disease until the bird is under stress, such as laying eggs, or feeding or weaning young.

### Endoscopy/Biopsy

This diagnostic procedure is more complicated than those listed above and would be used only in special circumstances, one of which may be used to determine the sex of a breeding bird. Occasionally, a biopsy of a diseased organ may be taken through the endoscope for a more precise diagnosis.

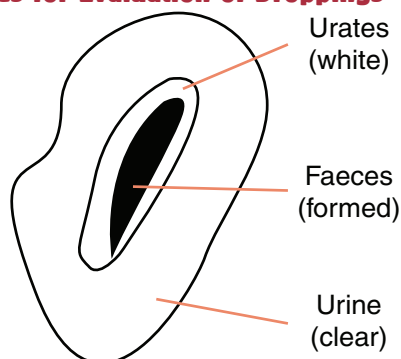
# Recognising Signs of Illness in your Bird

Early signs of illness in birds are frequently not recognised by the pet owner. As a survival tactic in the wild, a sick bird will attempt to maintain a normal appearance for as long as possible, so that by the time any signs of illness are apparent, the bird may have been ill for some time. The bird that dies "suddenly" may be the result of the owners failure to make distinctions in the appearance or behaviour of the bird prior to that time.

## Observations of Droppings

This is a simple method of monitoring your bird's health. Paper towels, newspaper or other smooth surfaces can be used to line the cage bottom so that the number, volume, colour and consistence of the droppings can be noted daily.

## Guidelines for Evaluation of Droppings



Normal pet bird droppings consist of 3 parts:

1. **FAECES** are food waste material from the digestive tract. Normal faeces can vary somewhat in colour and consistency, depending on the diet. Diets with a high seed content usually produce homogeneous black or dark green faeces. Birds on formulated diets (pellets) normally exhibit softer, brownish faeces.
  2. **URINE**, the liquid portion, is normally clear. A diet high in vegetable and fruit matter may increase the urine component.
  3. **URATES**, or creamy white waste from the kidney, are often suspended in the liquid urine or appear to wrap around the faeces.
- Prolonged moult or continual presence of pin feathers
  - Feather picking
  - Shifting of feet
  - Lameness

- Brown stain in feathers over the nostrils
- Crusty material in the nostrils
- Loss of feathers or swelling around the eye
- Overgrowth of beak or nails
- Baldness
- Sores on feet

## Signs of Illness

The following symptoms may indicate a serious health problem and veterinary assistance should be sought at once!

1. Change in character of the droppings.  
The sick bird may exhibit:
  - decrease in the total number or volume of droppings
  - change in the colour of the URATES or URINE
  - an increase in the water content of the FAECES (diarrhoea)
  - decrease in the FAECES volume with increased URATES
  - increase in the URINE portion (polyuria)
2. Decreased or excessive food or water consumption.
3. Change in attitude, personality or behavior - decreased activity, decreased talking and singing, increased sleeping, no response to stimuli.
4. Change in appearance or posture - ruffled feathers, weakness, inability to stand, staying on the bottom of the cage, sitting low on the perch, drooping wings, convulsions.
5. Change in character of respiration - any noticeable breathing movement (e.g. tail bobbing) while resting, heavy breathing after exertion, change in quality of voice, respiratory sounds such as sneezing, wheezing or clicking.
6. Change in weight or general body condition as determined by a gram scale, or by handling; a prominent breast bone due to loss of breast muscle tissue is serious!
7. Enlargement or swelling of the body.
8. Injury or bleeding.
9. Vomiting or regurgitation.
10. Discharge from nostrils, eyes or mouth

**Further information on diet, hygiene, worming, vitamins, bird stress, licensing, Avian Vets and much more is available from the team at Kellyville Pets.**



At Kellyville Pets, we encourage responsible pet ownership.

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