



Avian Care

The following information has been provided as a suggested guide for the care of your pet. This is intended to be a brief overview of basic care and medical conditions. Be sure to ask if you need further information regarding a specific aspect of your bird's care.

Getting to Know Your Bird

Each species of birds is unique. While the information provided here detail the basics for most birds, it is important that you find out as much as you can about the special care requirements, personality traits, and problems associated with your particular species of bird. Books, avian magazines, and reputable internet sites are all good sources of information. Bird breeders are another source regarding your specific species. Even if your bird was purchased from a pet store, be sure to ask about the breeder. Many stores may be able to provide you with the breeder information.

In addition, each bird has his/her own unique personality. By taking the time to get to know your bird as an individual, you will develop a much stronger bond with him or her. Many people often want to know if their bird is male or female. In some species, it is possible to tell this by looking at the bird. In most species, however, we need to take a blood sample and submit it for DNA testing.

Annual Examinations

While birds do not require any annual vaccinations like a dog or cat, it is still very important that you bring your bird in at least once a year for a complete physical exam. This will help insure that your bird remains healthy. It will allow early detection of serious problems and diseases.

At each exam, our doctors will record your birds weight, check the body condition, eyes ears, mouth, beak, heart, lungs, legs/wings, and palpate (feel for abnormalities) the area below the keel (breast bone). A fecal gram stain to look for gastrointestinal problems is routinely done at these visits. Baseline blood work is recommended for all birds to screen the liver and kidneys and look for other internal problems. This should be repeated periodically in young birds according to the doctor's recommendations and yearly for older birds. In addition, this is an opportunity to review all health and care practices related to your bird so that our veterinarian can make suggestions regarding how to improve your bird's care.

Cage Recommendations

In order to insure that your bird has proper space, we recommend that the cage be at least twice the length of your bird's wingspan in all directions. As a rule, the more time that the bird spends inside his/her cage, the larger the cage should be. Bigger cages provide the room your bird needs to exercise. Horizontal cages (long and short) are better than vertical cages (narrow and tall). The bars of the cage should be both vertical and horizontal. This allows the bird to climb up and down the sides of the cage. Homemade cages are not a good idea because most available materials contain metals that are toxic to birds. It is also best to avoid cages with doors that slide up and down in a guillotine fashion (unless they latch open) because this style of door makes it difficult to safely move the bird in and out of the cage.

The cage furnishings are almost as important as the cage, itself. Birds are very intelligent animals, requiring a great degree of stimulation. A variety of toys should be available for the bird's entertainment. These toys should be placed in the cage in a rotating fashion so that the bird does not become bored. It is better to rotate in a few toys at a time than to overload the cage with toys.

The perches are also an important part of the cages furniture. Wood perches are best. The diameter of the perch should be small enough for the bird's toes to wrap two-thirds to completely around the perch. It is important to place the perches in such a way so that they are not over food or water dishes to avoid fecal contamination. For birds that have problems with overgrown toenails, one of the cage perches may be concrete or covered in sand paper to help the bird naturally wear the toe nails.

Food dishes should be placed high in the cage to help prevent fecal contamination. At least two full sets of dishes are recommended so that one set can be used while the other is being cleaned. It is important to thoroughly clean dishes on a daily basis. Wide, shallow dishes are better than deep dishes, especially if a variety of food is being offered in the same dish. This allows the bird easy access to all food items and prevents birds from tossing food out of the dish in order to get to the desired items.

There should be a grate in the bottom of the cage to keep the bird away from fecal material and dropped food. Usually there is a drawer under the grate to catch these droppings. This drawer can be lined with newspaper or butcher paper to facilitate cleaning. Corn cob bedding is not recommended as it can become moldy and lead to respiratory fungal infections if it becomes wet. Keeping your bird's cage cleaned is one of the best things you can do to prevent fungal and bacterial infections. All dropped food and feces should be cleaned out of the cage on a daily basis. The entire cage should be cleaned at least weekly with a solution of one part bleach and thirty parts water. Harsh household cleaning products are not recommended because of their residual effects.

The location of the cage should be carefully considered. Birds are social creatures; therefore, it is important to keep the bird in a location where he or she will have plenty of opportunity for interaction with humans. At the same time, being at the center of activity may be stressful for some birds. Birds should never be kept in the kitchen because of the risk of food contamination. It is also important to choose a location away from drafts and direct sunlight. If you have dogs or cats, make sure that they are not able to disturb the birdcage.

Light and Dark Cycles

Birds need 10-14 hours of sleep each night (ideally this should vary with season and should correspond with the natural light and dark cycles). Since your bird will wake up at dawn even if the cage is covered, it is important to make sure that he/she is in a dark, quiet environment 10-14 hours before dawn (usually this is at or shortly after dusk). Since this does not correspond with most family schedules, it may be necessary to have a small sleeping cage in a bedroom or bathroom to separate the bird from the household activity during this required sleeping time. If your bird is not getting enough sleep, he/she will be at a higher risk for illness and/or feather picking. The length of the light and dark periods also influences behavior (particularly mating and egg laying behaviors) in many birds.

It is also important to provide birds with a source of ultraviolet (UV) light on a daily basis. Sunlight is the best source, but it is filtered by window glass preventing the UV rays from reaching your bird. Commercial UV bulbs are available through most pet stores (it may be necessary to look in the reptile section). Look for a bulb that covers the full UV spectrum (UVA and UVB). The UVB part of the spectrum is the most beneficial to your bird. Without an adequate source of UVB light, birds cannot make vitamin D, an important vitamin in keeping calcium levels balanced. Vitamin D is especially important for young growing birds to help them develop strong bones and for egg-laying females to prevent them from exhausting their calcium stores.

Nutrition

Many people make the mistake of feeding their bird only commercial birdseed. This does not provide a balanced source of nutrition for your pet, even if the package claims that it is “complete and balanced.” In fact, for most birds, 75% of the diet should be pellets (for budgies and cockatiels, 50% of the diet should be pellets). Only 1/8-1/4 of your bird’s diet should be seed. An additional 1/8-1/4 of the diet should consist of fresh fruits and vegetables (carefully washed). The remainder of the diet should consist of pellet food from a reputable manufacturer. This is the most complete and balanced form of nutrition. A good pelleted diet should contain all the vitamins and minerals your pet needs without requiring additional supplements. However, birds should be on a multivitamin if they are eating less than the optimal amount of pellets or if they are actively egg laying, still growing, or recovering from a serious illness or injury.

It is important to avoid chocolate and salty foods as these can cause major health problems. In addition, avocados are poisonous to birds and should never be a part of the diet. Birds should never be allowed to consume beverages or other products containing alcohol or caffeine as these substances can be very dangerous for your bird.

It is often difficult to get an older bird to accept a new diet. Food choice is a learned behavior and may take time to develop. It is important to provide only the new food and nothing else for short periods of time. If other selections are available, the bird may not try the new food. Mixing foods is not effective because birds will pick through the mix and eat only the parts they like. Be sure, however, not to let your bird go more than 8-12 hours without eating. It may be necessary to put the pellets out in the morning but feed the old food in the afternoon and evening until the bird is comfortable with the pellet diet. Another helpful suggestion is to choose a brightly colored pellet mix. The bright colors attract the bird and stimulate interest in the food. Hand-feeding the pellet diet may also ease the transition to the new diet.

Transitioning your bird to a pelleted diet is perhaps the single most important way that you can improve your bird’s health. Be consistent and persistent about introducing the pellets until your bird accepts them. Buy the smallest package available and keep it in the freezer to keep the pellets fresh longer. Dedicate one day a week to introducing the pelleted food. Studies show that almost all birds can be switched over to a pelleted diet if the diet is offered consistently over a long period of time.

Uncaged Birds

If you intend to allow your bird to spend time outside his/her cage, it is important to follow a few precautions. First of all, make sure your bird’s wings are trimmed on a regular basis. This prevents your bird from flying long distances or escaping. Clipping the wings will prevent the bird from gaining lift, but will still allow him/her to glide down from high objects or perches. Because of this, it is important to watch for objects that he/she might glide into (hot ranges, halogen lights, fans, etc.). Draw the curtains across the windows so that your bird does not inadvertently fly into one. If you choose not to clip your bird’s wings, opportunities for free flight should be limited to closely controlled, supervised sessions. During these sessions, be sure to lock all doors and close all unscreened windows. Turn off all ceiling fans (these are a particularly deadly hazard for our flighted friends). Make sure that all other pets are contained outside of the flight area—cats and dogs have a strong prey drive and may try to catch a flying bird, even if they show no interest to the caged bird. Finally, make sure to choose a flight area that can be limited by closing doors and that does not have ledges or landing places too high for you to access should you need to retrieve your bird from a dangerous or undesirable situation. Parrots and other large pet birds have the intelligence and curiosity of a two-year-old child. This often puts them in danger. It also means that they are capable of creating a big mess.



Sick Birds

Signs of Illness

Most birds will try to hide their illness. In the wild, birds that act sick will be the first to be attacked by predators. For this reason, if your bird is acting sick, it is usually important to seek immediate medical attention instead of waiting a few days to see if the problem clears up. In order to catch problems early, there are a few things you can look for:

1. A decrease in activity or vocalization is often a sign of illness
2. Birds sitting at the bottom of the cage with feathers fluffed are almost always ill. It is important to watch for this at quiet times when your bird is undisturbed. Many birds will act fine if they know someone is watching them, but sit fluffed when they think they are alone.
3. Decrease in eating. Be sure to look at the amount of food actually eaten, and not just the amount of time your bird is spending at the food bowl.
4. Increase in drinking. With certain disease conditions, birds will drink a lot more water than normal.
5. Rough, tattered looking or missing feathers may be a sign of chronic disease.
6. Sneezing or nasal discharge may be signs of respiratory problems.
7. A change in the appearance or amount of fecal dropping may be an indication of problems. Make a habit of examining your bird's droppings daily. Call Clermont Animal Hospital immediately if changes in droppings are noted.
8. Decreased muscle mass in the breast muscles is the best way to identify weight loss at home. Weight loss is a clear indication of an ongoing medical problem. The doctors at Clermont Animal Hospital will be happy to teach you the proper keel palpation technique to evaluate muscle mass. This is a very simple thing you can do weekly at home to monitor your bird's health.

Respiratory Problems

Birds have a highly specialized respiratory system because of the demands of flight. This makes them very sensitive to airborne particles, toxins and respiratory diseases. It is important to keep birds in a clean, dust-free environment. Changing the furnace filter regularly and/or using a Hepa air filter can help minimize undesirable air particles. Also note that birds are most susceptible to respiratory problems during periods of stress or temperature fluctuations. Below are some of the common types of respiratory problems in birds.

1. **Toxins:** Birds have a highly specialized respiratory system because of the demands of flight. This makes them very sensitive to airborne particles. Many common household products can cause respiratory problems in pet birds. The use of the following products should be minimized, especially within close proximity: perfume, aerosol products, deodorant, spray air freshener, cigarette/cigar smoke, incense, scented candles, cleaning products (especially those that suggest use in a well-ventilated area), fumes from fresh paint, and flea/tick sprays. The most dangerous problem occurs when non-stick (Teflon-coated) cooking dishes become overheated. When this surface becomes too hot, it releases toxins into the air. Only a small amount of this airborne poison is needed to kill your bird. For this reason, it is important to take care when using any Teflon products so as not to overheat them. It is also important to keep your bird out of the kitchen while you are cooking.
2. **Bacterial/Viral Infections:** Both upper respiratory infections (similar to colds in people) and pneumonia are very common in birds. In mild cases, birds will show only general and vague signs of illness with these infections. In more severe cases, birds may show signs of breathing difficulty. These include open-beak breathing, tail bobbing or wing movement in rhythm with breathing, hard or fast breathing, and/or

neck extension. Birds showing ANY of the above signs of difficult breathing should receive immediate emergency attention.

3. **Fungal Infections:** While not as common as other respiratory problems, fungal infections can result in severe and ongoing illness in birds. They are expensive to treat and difficult to cure. For this reason, it is best to take precautions to avoid fungal respiratory infections:
 - a. Do NOT use corn cob bedding in the bottom of your bird's cage—this bedding is notorious for carrying fungal spores that become airborne and are inhaled by the bird.
 - b. The absorbent material in the bottom of your bird's cage should be changed DAILY to prevent mold and fungal growth. For this reason, it is best to use paper or paper towels instead of bedding materials in the cage bottom.
 - c. The shells of peanuts and sunflower seeds frequently contain fungal spores. This is a common source of aspergillosis, one of the worst fungal respiratory infections in birds. Seeds and nuts sold specifically for birds have been treated to kill these spores. Do NOT feed your birds unshelled peanuts or sunflower seeds unless they are specifically packaged for bird consumption.
4. **Chlamydiosis (Parrot Fever)**

Chlamydia is a type of bacteria that lives inside the cells of birds. This can cause a respiratory infection and/or a liver infection in your bird. It can also cause flu-like symptoms in humans. People with immune problems are the most at risk, but temporary reduction in the immune system due to a cold or stress can also make people more susceptible to infection. This disease is sometimes hard to detect in birds because not all birds that are infected will show signs of illness. There is a blood test that we can perform to help in identifying this infection.

Gastrointestinal (GI) Problems

Like respiratory problems, GI problems are common in birds especially during periods of stress. Yeast infections and bacterial overgrowths are the most common GI problems seen. The doctors at Clermont Animal Hospital recommend a fecal gram stain test to screen for these problems. This test should be performed on a yearly basis, following periods of stress, or when signs of illness indicate a GI problem. Birds should not be given foods containing yeast (breads, pastas, etc.) for three days before this test whenever possible to prevent confusion between dietary and infectious yeast.

Signs of GI illness include decreased appetite, weight loss, loss of breast muscle mass, changes in fecal droppings, regurgitation, and/or vomiting. In some cases birds may also pluck feathers over the areas of the crop (at the base of the neck), breast, and abdomen. Please call to schedule an appointment if you notice any of these changes in your bird.

Feather Picking

Some birds become feather pickers at some point during their life. This may range from feather damage from over-grooming to birds who pluck themselves bald except for the feathers on the head. A wide variety of medical and behavioral problems can cause or contribute to feather picking. If your bird starts to over-groom or pluck feathers, schedule an appointment so that our veterinarian can determine if there is a medical cause and/or provide advise for dealing with behavioral causes.

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