

Avian Healthcare Basics

How do I know if my bird is sick?



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Prior to joining the Medical Center for Birds in Oakley, California, she worked as an associate veterinarian in Dallas, Texas, where she practiced small animal, avian and exotic animal medicine. Her professional goals are to complete an internship and residency in avian medicine and surgery, to attain a board certification in avian practice and to become an associate veterinarian at an avian specialty practice.

Dr. Fitzgerald shares her home with a Blue-headed Pionus, two Timneh African Greys and three cats.

In general, healthy parrots are alert, bright-eyed, active and interested in what's going on around them. Of course, individual birds differ in their activity level and behavior, and all parrots spend some portion of the day resting and napping. A normal, healthy bird can be expected to spend portions of the day eating, playing, vocalizing, and interacting with other members of the household. Bird owners often notice that their birds are most active and noisy in the mornings and evenings, and when household activity is at its highest, and are more restful during the intervening periods.

When assessing your bird's health, consistency is very important: Provided that a stable home environment and routine are in place, a healthy bird should be fairly consistent in his or her behavior, activity level, and appetite. For this reason, you should be alert for changes, even if they may seem insignificant.

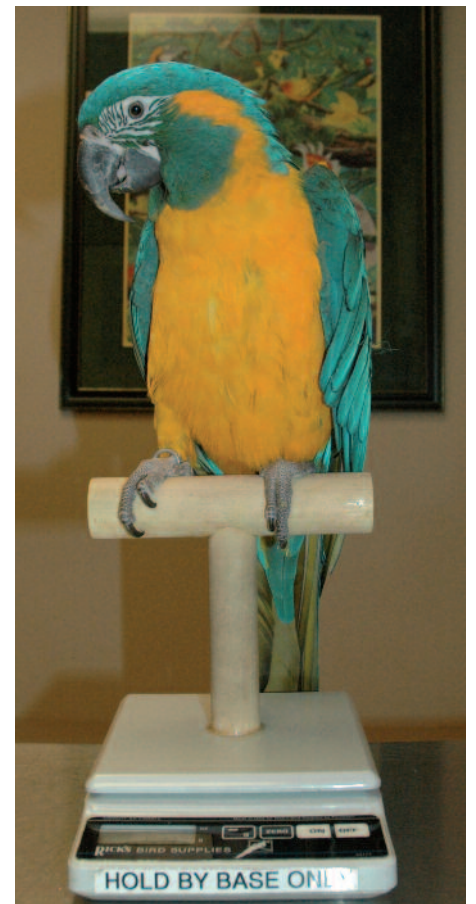
It is a good idea to regularly monitor your bird's body weight. You can do so at home using a small scale that weighs in grams. Although you can purchase a scale marketed specifically for birds, you can also obtain an inexpensive postal scale from an office supply store that works just as well. Checking your bird's weight once a week or so can help you recognize significant changes; both large losses and gains can be important and should be brought to the attention of your veterinarian.

You can also feel your bird's breast musculature to assess his or her pectoral muscle condition. The pectoral muscles of most birds are well developed to support flight, and lay on either side of the "keel," a pronounced bony ridge that is part of the sternum. Begin by gently feeling

your bird's breast to identify the keel, and then slide your finger to either side to feel the softer muscle tissue. Pectoral muscle is more developed in some individuals than others, and may be somewhat reduced in birds that do not fly frequently. What's important is familiarizing yourself with your bird's normal muscle condition, so that you can better recognize changes that can accompany illness.

Recognizing Signs of Illness

In addition to familiarizing yourself with your bird's normal behavior and monitoring his or her pectoral muscle condition and body weight, you should also pay attention to changes in your bird's energy or activity level, appetite, droppings, or behavior. Birds are notorious for exhibiting



Teaching your bird to step onto a scale allows you to get regular weights. Weight change can be an important first sign of illness.

Article and Photos by Dr. Brenna Fitzgerald

very subtle early disease symptoms, with signs of illness not becoming apparent until the illness is very advanced. Some have theorized that this represents an evolutionary adaptation: birds that can disguise illness are more likely to avoid being picked off by predators in the wild. Regardless of the reason, early symptoms are often overlooked or discounted by bird owners, such that veterinary care is not sought until the bird is very ill. Clearly, early awareness is very important, as it may make the difference between life and death.

Birds that are not feeling well may become quieter and less active, and may show reduced interest in socialization or play. You may notice that he or she spends a greater proportion of the day sleeping or resting, keeps his or her feathers fluffed, or is less energetic when going about normal activities. Furthermore, a sick bird may choose to stay on a lower perch or on the cage bottom, often because it takes less energy to do so. Changes in a bird's typical behavior, including the way he or she interacts with others, can also be important.

You should also observe your bird for changes in appetite. This not only includes a loss of appetite (termed anorexia), but also a relative increase or decrease, or a change in preferred foods. Birds can sometimes become more "finicky" when ill, showing interest only in highly palatable foods and abandoning their primary diet.

In addition, the character of your bird's droppings can provide a wealth of information. The dropping contains three components, the feces produced by the gastrointestinal tract, and the urates and urine produced by the kidneys. Fecal color, volume, and consistency can vary tremendously and are affected by numerous factors, including dietary intake. Birds on a seed-based diet typically have primarily green feces, while those on formulated diets (pellets) have more

voluminous feces that take on the color of the pellets consumed. Looser feces may be produced when birds consume a greater portion of fresh fruits and vegetables. Urates, a waste product eliminated by the kidneys, are typically white in appearance, but can also be cream-colored or light yellow in color. Urine, accounting for the liquid portion of the dropping, is most often clear, light green, or may take on the color of colored pellet varieties offered in the diet.

Be alert for changes in your bird's droppings, or in your bird's ability to pass droppings, as these can be indicative of disease. Notable abnormalities include passage of black feces (called melena), which can occur with upper gastrointestinal bleeding, blood in the feces, loose feces (diarrhea), passage of undigested food, or malodorous feces. Abnormal urates may appear bright yellow, green or pink, and abnormal urine may be dark green, brown, or contain blood. Changes in urine volume can also be important; if you notice a consistent increase in urine volume, especially if this is accompanied by increased thirst, you should consult your avian veterinarian.



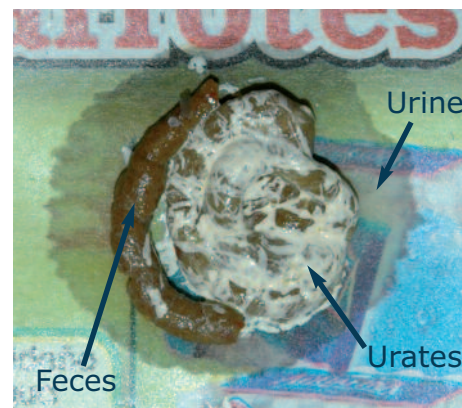
Healthy Blue-headed Parrot is bright-eyed, alert and engaging in normal preening behavior.

Choosing an Avian Veterinarian

For any animal, people and parrots included, preventative healthcare is of crucial importance, as it can allow early detection of disease and timely treatment. This is especially true of birds, as signs of illness can be subtle and delay in care can have devastating consequences.

The first order of business is choosing an experienced avian veterinarian. This can be more difficult than it sounds, because there are many veterinary practitioners out there with different levels of expertise and different skills to bring to the table.

Normal dropping from a parrot on a formulated diet.





Once birds show symptoms like this Cockatiel, they are often very ill.

All veterinarians are required to complete a four-year course of veterinary training to earn their degree (Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) or Veterinary Medical Doctor (VMD)). During these four years, students learn about many domestic animal species, and usually have the opportunity to choose a primary focus. Students with a special interest in exotic species, including birds, reptiles, and small mammals, may take special classes and gain hands-on experience in the care of these species. However, most veterinary programs provide only basic knowledge of exotic medicine. Therefore, students with a special interest in exotics must pursue ongoing continuing education after graduation in the form of additional classes, conferences, and mentorship. Alternatively, they can pursue more formal training, in order to become “board-certified” in the specialty of their choice. For an avian medicine specialty in the United States, this credentialing process is overseen by the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners (ABVP), which requires candidates to have completed five years of veterinary practice, and to pass specialty testing, among numerous other credentialing requirements. In the UK this process is overseen by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) known as DipZooMed or a European College Diploma, known as DipECAMS.

Board-certified specialists in avian medicine have some extra letters behind their names (ABVP-avian) and are relatively few in number. There are also many non-credentialed practitioners with a special interest in birds, who have gathered

considerable experience and strived to remain up-to-date via continuing education. Furthermore, many of these individuals appreciate the importance of consulting with more experienced colleagues when presented with a case that exceeds their level of expertise. When appropriate, they may recommend referral to a board-certified colleague or hospital with additional diagnostic or surgical capabilities. There are many great veterinarians out there, both board-certified and not. The challenge lies in choosing one that meets the needs of you and your bird, inspires confidence, and is willing to consult with other veterinarians when appropriate.

When making your choice, consider not only the practitioner’s level of knowledge, but also his or her comfort level when handling birds, including an emphasis on gentle handling that does not cause undue stress. Look for someone who sees a large number of avian patients and makes an effort to stay current in the field. If in doubt, ask questions that will help clarify your concerns. Lastly, seek advice and recommendations from reputable individuals such as other veterinarians, experienced breeders, retailers, or other bird owners.

Preventative Health Care

Once you have decided on an avian veterinarian, it is important to bring your bird in for “regularly scheduled maintenance,” including annual physical examinations and appropriate grooming. In principle, such a visit should be structured to improve your bird’s health and welfare by helping you learn details of training and other forms of enrichment. In addition to these foundational

components of the annual examination, your veterinarian may recommend routine, screening diagnostic tests, such as blood work, to monitor your bird’s systemic health. Although these types of tests and procedures definitely have merit, it is prudent to keep in mind that they are not necessarily mandatory, and that the true definition of wellness is not delineated by tests and test results alone. Many veterinary practices also offer boarding services, and knowing your bird is under veterinary supervision while you’re out of town can provide some extra peace of mind.

When Should You Consult a Veterinarian?

The best rule of thumb is: If in doubt, GO. When it comes to birds, it is always preferable to err on the side of caution. If you are unsure, call your veterinarian’s office to discuss the situation.

It is also important to locate a veterinary emergency center that is equipped to handle bird emergency care after-hours. It may be unrealistic and unfair to expect emergency veterinarians to be well versed in all aspects of avian medicine, but it is fair and appropriate to utilize their services to stabilize your bird prior to transfer to your regular veterinarian. This may include control of bleeding, fracture stabilization, pain control, and fluid therapy.

No one knows your bird better than you. For this reason, you should always trust your intuition if you think that your bird may be ill. Even if the signs are subtle, they should not be discounted because they may truly be significant.



Health / Veterinary Listings

AAV (Association of Avian Veterinarians) - International Listings

<http://aav.org/vet-lookup/>

Avian Veterinarians List - Australia

http://www.aav.org/vet-lookup/locate-vet2.php?query_field=country&search_string=Australia

Avian Veterinarians List - Canada

http://www.aav.org/vet-lookup/locate-vet2.php?query_field=country&search_string=Canada

Avian Veterinarians List - United Kingdom

http://www.parrotpassionsuk.com/Advice/Uk_Avian_Vets.htm

Gillian Willis - Toxicology

<http://www.exoticbird.com/gillian>