

# Signs of Illness in Birds

Early signs of illness in birds are frequently missed by the average pet owner. In the wild, a sick bird will attempt to maintain a normal appearance as long as possible. One result of this behavior in companion birds is that by the time signs of illness are obvious, the bird may have been ill for some time. The bird that dies “suddenly” may be the result of failure of the caretaker to identify subtle changes in the appearance or behavior of the bird. For this reason, owners should familiarize themselves with early signs of illness in pet birds so that any therapy and care by their avian veterinarian will have a more favorable outcome.

## Evaluation of Droppings

Droppings can be an indicator of your bird’s health. Paper towels, newspaper or other smooth surfaces can be used to line the cage bottom so that the number, volume, color, and consistency of the droppings can be noted. A bird’s normal droppings will vary in appearance depending on its diet.

### Normal Droppings

Feces (food waste material from the digestive tract) can differ somewhat in color and consistency. Diets with a high seed content usually produce homogeneous dark green feces.

### Avoid

- Sandpaper perches
- Air pollutants such as cigarette smoke, insecticides, and toxic fumes from overheated non-stick utensils
- Mite boxes or mite sprays
- Easily dismantled toys such as balsa wood, small link chain items, toys with metal clips or skewers, toys with lead weights
- Access to toxic house plants, stoves or fireplaces, ceiling fans, uncovered toilets, leaded glass, cats, dogs, or young children
- Access to cage substrate

Birds on formulated diets normally exhibit soft, brownish feces. Colored pellets may cause color changes in feces as well. Urine is normally a clear liquid. A diet high in vegetable and fruit matter may increase the urine component. Urates (creamy white waste from the kidney) are often suspended in the liquid urine or appear to wrap around the feces.

### Abnormal Droppings

- Decrease in the total number or volume of droppings
- Color change of the urates/urine to green or yellow
- Increase in the water content of the feces (diarrhea)
- Increase in the urine portion (polyuria).
- Decrease in the feces volume with increased urates (polyurates)
- Presence of blood
- Any strong odor in the droppings

Some normal variations may be seen in impending egg laying females, baby birds on handfeeding formulas, the first void of the morning, conditions of nervousness and stress, or following a large meal of a specific colored food (e.g., blueberries). Thus, the owner should evaluate several droppings under normal circumstances before becoming alarmed.

## Other Early Signs of Disease

The following signs may not require emergency treatment but, because they are abnormal, indicate the bird should be checked by your avian veterinarian.

- Prolonged molt or continual presence of lost pinfeathers
- Broken, bent, picked or chewed feathers
- Unusual or dull feather color
- Stained feathers over nares or around the face or vent
- Crusty material in or around nostrils
- Redness, swelling or loss of feathers around eyes, baldness
- Flakiness on skin or beak
- Sores on bottom of feet
- Lameness or shifting of body weight
- Overgrowth of beak or nails
- Minor changes in talking, biting, or eating habits

## Signs of Serious Illness

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

- Significant changes in number and appearance of the droppings
- Decreased or excessive food or water consumption
- Change in attitude, personality or behavior
- Fluffed posture
- Decreased vocalization
- Change in breathing or abnormal respiratory sounds
- Change in weight or general body condition
- Enlargement or swelling on the body
- Any bleeding or injury
- Vomiting or regurgitation
- Discharge from nostrils, eyes, or mouth



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## Emergency First Aid

Heat and food are the two most important considerations for temporary care of the sick bird until it can be seen by your avian veterinarian. The bird should be kept quiet and handling should be minimized.

### Heat

Ideal ambient temperature for sick birds is 80-85 degrees. A temporary incubator can be made by placing a heating pad along the side or floor of the cage and draping the entire cage with towels, a blanket or cage cover. Space heaters or heat bulbs may be useful as well. Ensure that any cage cover does not touch the light/heat source. If the bird starts breathing rapidly or holds its wings away from its body, the temperature is too high. Certain types of room heaters (e.g., kerosene) should be avoided.

### Food

Every effort must be made to encourage a sick bird to eat. Place food within easy access. If the bird is resting on the cage, food can be placed there. Offer favorite foods by hand. An electrolyte solution, such as warmed electrolyte drinks or pancake syrup in water can be offered drop by drop with a syringe or eye dropper.

- Don't attempt to drop food or liquids into a bird too weak to swallow.
- Don't give any drugs or remedies that were not specifically prescribed for the bird.
- Don't wait to see how the bird is tomorrow.
- DO call your avian veterinarian!

## Postmortem Examination

If a bird is found dead, the body should be refrigerated (not frozen) and taken to an avian veterinarian to possibly determine the cause of death. This is important to protect the health and safety of family members and other birds in the home.

## For More Information

For more information on birds, ask your veterinarian for copies of the following AAV Client Education Brochures:

- Basic Care
- Behavior: Normal and Abnormal
- Avian Chlamydiosis & Psittacosis
- Feather Loss
- Feeding
- Health Exam
- Injury Prevention and Emergency Care
- Signs of Illness
- When Should I Take My Bird to a Vet?

## Looking for an Avian Veterinarian Near You?

For help finding a qualified avian veterinarian in your area, go to [www.aav.org](http://www.aav.org) and click "Find a Vet."

## Online Resources



Follow AAV on Facebook ([www.facebook.com/aavonline](http://www.facebook.com/aavonline)) for great tips and the latest news for pet bird owners. You can also find us on Twitter (@aavonline) and YouTube!

Our website, [www.aav.org](http://www.aav.org), offers a Find-a-Vet tool to help pet bird owners locate avian veterinarians around the world. We also offer a variety of resources such as basic bird care instructions and more. Visit the website today!

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