

Symptoms of Illness in Avians

There are three main criteria involved when examining birds for symptoms of illness:

1. the appearance of the bird
2. the state of activity of the bird
3. the environment in which it is housed

The appearance of a bird is often a direct reflection of its state of health. Birds have a high normal body temperature (103 to 106) and a high metabolic rate. By the time symptoms of illness are physically visible in birds, they are usually very ill, many times critically so. A day in the life of a sick bird is equivalent to a week in the life of sick human. Therefore, all cases involving sick birds demand immediate treatment. The following is a general health checklist:

FLUFFED FEATHERS Fluffed feathers are indicative of chills and/or fever. When a bird fluffs its feathers, air is trapped underneath them and provides insulation. Birds with this symptom often assume a hunched over position on their perches. Weaker ones are often found huddled on the cage floor.

EYES Check for any discharge or irritation.

NOSTRILS Check for any discharge. The feathers surrounding the nostrils are often matted and discolored in the presence of nasal discharge. The nares may be plugged with dried discharge.

ABDOMEN Distention or “bloat” of the abdomen may be indicative of many diseases or disorders. Whatever the cause, it is apt to be serious.

BREAST The breast muscles (pectorals) should be nearly even with the keel bone. If the keel bone is easily grasped with the fingers, the bird is underweight.

VENT Examine the feathers about this area (cloaca). The feathers should be clean and dry. Wet and soiled feathers are indicative of diarrhea and/or urinary disorder.

DROPPINGS Examination of the bird’s housing should include looking at the droppings. Normal droppings have a formed dark green fecal mass surrounded by looser, white urinary waste. Extremely loose droppings are indicative of diarrhea. Abnormal discoloration of the droppings may indicate a metabolic disorder. Excessive whitish material often indicates a urinary disorder. (refer to next page)

FEET Examine the feet for excessive scalliness. This is often a sign of scaly mite infestation. Overgrown nails can interfere with proper perching.

SKIN Check for lice, mites, growths, eruptions and obvious injuries. A small magnifying glass is a helpful tool for avian examinations.

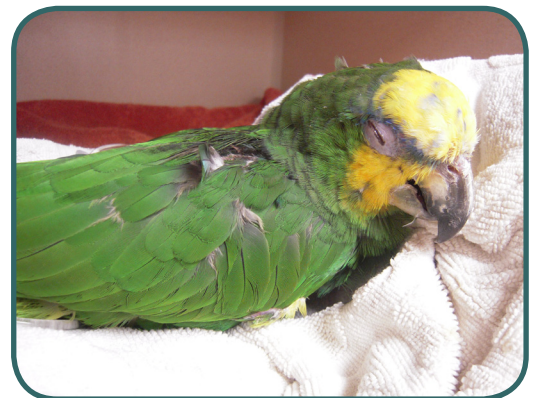
RESPIRATION Look for signs of open-mouthed breathing or “flicking” of the tail with each breath.

ACTIVITY An active bird is usually a healthy bird. Don’t confuse sleep with lethargy.

CROP Palpate the crop. Birds with a healthy appetite will usually have a full crop.



A critically ill parakeet



Sick Orange-winged Amazon

Sick birds require supplemental heat to maintain their body temperature, along with fluids, nutrition, and quiet.

Symptoms of Illness in Avians cont.

A WORD ABOUT DROPPINGS:

Bird droppings are a good barometer for determining a bird's general well being and can reveal conditions or illness that require medical attention.

- Normal bird droppings are excreted in rounded piles consisting of three distinct parts-feces, urates and urine. Parrot droppings are usually odorless
- Feces are solid, and worm-like and are the darkest part of the dropping
- Feces can change color depending on what the bird has recently eaten. Birds eating primarily seed have green feces, a pellet diet produces brown feces, and other foods, like berries can cause the feces to become red, pink, or purple.
- Urates are off-white, cream-colored, or slightly yellowish and opaque.
- Urine is the clear, watery part of the dropping. If a bird has been drinking a lot of water or eating foods with high water content (certain fruits or vegetables), their dropping will contain more urine. This is often mistaken for diarrhea. Unformed feces that are nearly indistinguishable from the urates and urine indicate diarrhea.
- Birds experiencing stressful conditions may have increased urine.
- Little or no droppings may indicate the bird is dehydrated or not eating

What To Look For: If any of the following are present and/or persist in the bird's droppings for more than 24 hours, a veterinarian should evaluate the bird.

- Red or black blood- internal bleeding, egg binding, intestinal infection, swallowed object
- Bubbles or air pockets – infection or gastrointestinal problem
- Undigested food – infection, pancreatic, or symptom of Proventricular Dilatation Disease (PDD)
- Extremely watery droppings (polyuria) – infection, kidney disease
- Lack of Urine – dehydration
- Yellow or bright green urates – liver disease, infection

REMEMBER: Dropping color, consistency, and volume can fluctuate with a bird's diet. Close monitoring of a bird's droppings will help you to detect illness they may be masking and help to safeguard the health of other birds in your shelter.

Healthy Droppings



Unhealthy Dropping



Authored by Monica Engebretson, Senior Program Associate, Born Free USA.

Photos: Center for Avian and Exotic Medicine, New York, NY and MAARS.