BIRD & EXOTIC
SINCE 1997 CLINIC OF SEATTLE

BASIC CARE FOR BIRDS

Nutrition

In general, psittacines (hook-billed birds) should be on a pelleted diet made specifically for birds, supplemented with healthy human foods such as fruit, vegetables, beans, pasta, low-sugar cereal, grains, and rice. Lories and lorikeets are the exception to this rule; they require a special nectar diet. For soft-billed birds such as toucans and mynah birds, ask your veterinarian about the recommended diet. Birds should never be fed foods high in fat and cholesterol such as seeds (see the handout on health problems that result from a seed diet for more details), eggs, meat (including chicken), or dairy products.

As psittacines are neither mammals nor carnivores, they actually lack the ability to digest meat and dairy products very well. Soy products such as soy yogurt, soy cream cheese, and tofu are acceptable alternatives. Caffeine, chocolate, and alcohol should be avoided as well as avocado, which is toxic to birds.

Environment

A healthy bird can tolerate temperatures that are comfortable to its owner; however, sudden changes in temperature may threaten the health of a sick bird. Pet birds can adapt to a wide range of humidity levels, although subtropical species may benefit from daily misting of the feathers. Supervised access to fresh air and direct, unfiltered sunlight seems to be beneficial as long as shade is available.

Housing:

Cages: For birds that are confined for most of the day, it is recommended to provide the largest cage that can fit in the home. It should be wide enough for the bird to stretch its wings out fully, and tall enough to accommodate long-tailed birds. Aside from these concerns, width is generally more important than height, as birds often like to stay in the highest parts of their cage no matter how tall it is. The cage should be strong enough to resist any damage from a chewing bird, and made of non-toxic material. The bar spacing should be narrow enough so that birds cannot get their heads stuck between the bars.

Perches: Natural wood perches from pesticide-free, non-toxic trees (such as northern hardwood citrus, eucalyptus, Australian pine, manzanita, and apple trees) are recommended over wooden dowels. Natural perches have a variety of diameters, and provide better exercise for a bird's feet. Perches should be placed to prevent droppings from contaminating food or water. Placing food and water bowls at opposite ends of the cage will give a bird some exercise between eating and drinking.

Hygiene: Food and water bowls and the cage floor should be cleaned daily. A more thorough cage cleaning should be done weekly. Newspapers, paper towels, or other paper liners are recommended for the cage bottom rather than wood chips, corncobs, kitty litter, or sand. Birds should not be allowed direct contact with the substrate, as it tends to grow bacteria and fungi.

Activity:

Pet birds are intelligent, active animals with complex psychological needs. Locate the cage near family activity, and provide a variety of bird-safe toys to encourage exercise and mental stimulation. Supervised flying around the house can be allowed, as long as the bird is protected from hazards such as ceiling fans, large windows, hot pans on the stove, sticky fly strips, and open doors.

General Care:

A new feather on a bird has a pinfeather cover. It is normal for the bird to pick at the cover to open it. Feathers should be kept free of oily substances. A gentle detergent such as baby shampoo can be used to clean soiled feathers. Otherwise, pure water is the most appropriate feather spray. Some owners keep their bird's wings clipped to prevent escape or injury, or to aid in taming and training. Leg bands may need to be removed if any swelling or constriction of the leg occurs. Many birds enjoy bathing daily in a dish or a large handful of wet lettuce leaves. Birds that don't bathe on their own can be misted with a spray bottle. We recommend a comprehensive annual exam for all birds, including a physical exam, blood panel, and cultures. See the handout entitled "Health Exam For Birds” for more information.

CHLAMYDOPHILA IN BIRDS

Chlamydophila (also known as "Psittacosis" or "parrot fever") is an avian disease caused by the organism *Chiamydophila psittac*i, and may be transmitted to humans. This organism is not the same as the one that causes genital Chlamydia in humans.

Transmission:
Chlamydophila is mainly transmitted through inhalation of contaminated dust that is shed from an infected bird, from its droppings or feathers. Close contact with birds that are shedding the organism increases the risk of infection. Birds under stress are more likely to shed the organism, so this disease is more prevalent in birds that have undergone the stress of shipping, overcrowding, or malnutrition. Infected birds can transmit the disease without showing any visible symptoms.

Clinical Signs:
Most symptoms of Chlamydophila are general enough that they may be associated with a number of other diseases. These symptoms can include low appetite, weight loss, depression, diarrhea, discharge from the eyes and nares, and even death. Lime-green diarrhea can be a common sign of the disease, as well. However, some affected birds may show little to no signs of illness; an infected bird may carry the disease with no symptoms until a stressful incident brings them out. Breeding birds can pass Chlamydophila to their babies, who are more susceptible to infections than adult birds and may subsequently die in the nest.

Diagnosis:
A conclusive diagnosis of Chlamydophila can be difficult, and depends upon the species, length of time since exposure, and the condition of the bird. Diagnostic tests include culturing the organism, antibody tests, antigen detection tests, an enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA), or a polymerase chain reaction assay (DNA-PCR). A positive test indicates the presence of the disease. However, a negative test may simply be the result of a bad sample, and does not conclusively show the absence of disease. For this reason, it is often recommended to run more than one type of test to support a diagnosis. Some veterinarians will treat a suspected case of Chlamydophila without a positive test result.

Treatment:
All exposed birds in the house should be treated and isolated with appropriate sanitary measures, to prevent the spread or reinfection of the disease. These measures include:

- Cleaning the premises with disinfectant
- Using caution when handling droppings and cage debris to keep dust circulation to a minimum
- Avoiding contact with the birds by elderly, young, sick, or immunosuppressed persons
- Removing calcium supplements as calcium interferes with the medication
- Reducing stress in the bird's environment

Treatment must be continued for a minimum of 45 days to be effective; deviation by the owner from the recommended dosage and time frame is the largest treatment problem. Medication can be administered by mouth, injection, mixing the antibiotic in soft foods/ drinking water, or medicated pellets. Other supportive treatment may be recommended by the veterinarian, depending upon the condition of the bird.

Transmission to Humans:
While Chlamydophila is transmissible from birds so humans, the incidence of transmission is rare considering the number of birds that carry the disease. Symptoms of the disease in humans include flu-like symptoms, respiratory distress, fever, chills, headaches, weakness, and fatigue. Treatment is simple and usually successful in humans, but a person who suspects that they may be infected should see their doctor as soon as possible, as delayed treatment can result in serious illness.

Preventative Measures:

- Take all newly-acquired birds to an avian veterinarian to screen for Chlamydophila
- Buy birds from suppliers who provide a health guarantee, or routinely screen their birds for Chlamydophila
- Quarantine all newly-acquired birds for a minimum of 30 days, even if they have been seen by an avian veterinarian for a new bird exam
- Take any other appropriate preventative measures recommended by your avian veterinarian

HEALTH EXAM FOR BIRDS

For new birds:
All newly acquired birds should also undergo a full annual exam with an avian vet as soon as possible, to make sure that they are healthy from the start. If all test**s a**re normal, the bird should still be quarantined from other birds in the house for at least 30 days, to reduce the risk of disease transmission

Avian Annual Exam: The annual exam for birds should include a full physical examination, avian blood panel, and both oral and fecal cultures. Try to locate a Board-Certified Avian Veterinarian, if possible. The physical exam, blood panel and cultures should be repeated on an annual basis to make sure that the bird is healthy, as symptoms of disease in birds tend to be more subtle than in dogs and cats; a bird's natural instinct is to hide its symptoms of disease for as long as possible. If any symptoms are noticed, (see the list of symptoms on the "Signs of Illness" handout), the bird should be examined right away by an avian vet, as the bird has most likely started getting sick before the symptoms actually appeared.

- During the physical exam, the vet will observe general body condition, attitude, and character of respiration, as well as check for abnormalities in the feathers, skin, beak, eyes, ears, nares, oral cavity, bones, muscles, heartbeat, abdomen, vent, and weight.
- The avian blood panel includes both a CBC and a blood chemistry. The CBC determines the amount and distribution of blood cells, which may reveal the possibility of certain diseases. The chemistry may provide information on imbalances in biochemical functions, or organ dysfunction.
- The culture of the choana (throat) and cloaca (vent) will determine whether there is an infection of any abnormal bacteria or yeast. Common infectious bacteria that birds can pick up from humans include Escherichia coli, Staphylococcus, and Enterobacter.

Other Tests:
Your vet may perform other tests or treatments, depending upon the bird's history and current health. They include, but are not limited to:

- Taking radiographs (X-ray films) to screen for bone fractures, tumors, the relative size of the internal organs, and any abnormalities in the lungs and air sacs. Air sacculitis, a disease in the membranous sacs attached to the lungs, can be caused by a fungal organism called aspergillus. This disease is more common in older birds. It is recommended that birds that are 15 years of age or older be X-rayed to check for this disease.
- Testing for Chlamydophila (also known as Psittacosis or parrot fever), the major avian disease that is transmissible to humans. For more information, see the handout on Chlamydophila.
- Viral screening for emerging and existing avian viruses, including Psittacine Beak

and Feather Disease, and Polyoma virus.

- The vaccine for Polyoma virus is recommended for all birds younger than 6-12 months who have been exposed to budgies. Budgies can carry this virus without symptoms, and it can be fatal to young birds. Any eclectus that is exposed to budgies should be vaccinated regardless of age, as they are more sensitive to Polyomna than other species.
- DNA Sexing

EARLY SIGNS OF ILLNESS

Studies have shown that when birds are experiencing symptoms of illness they usually mask their infection by maintaining a normal appearance. This is believed to be the result of protecting themselves from predators or being attacked by their own fiock in the wild.

If you notice any of these following signs in your bird, notify your avian veterinarian as soon as possible.

- Loss or decreased appetite
- Loss of weight
- Lethargy or hanging out at the bottom of the cage
- Sleeping more often
- Feathers fluffed
- Runny or discolored feces (if there is no change in diet)
- Decrease in numbers/volume of feces
- Watery droppings and/or increase in urine portion of the droppings
- Change in smell of droppings
- Open mouth breathing
- Sneezing
- Abnormal respiratory movements
- Fluid coming from the nares (nostrils), eyes, mouth
- Throwing up or regurgitation
- Decrease in singing, vocalizing, interest or change in overall attitude
- Feather picking or mutilating skin
- Overgrown beak (unless a birth defect).

WHY YOU SHOULDN'T FEED YOUR PET BIRD SEEDS

It is a common misconception that wild birds and therefore parrots eat only seeds. Most wild parrots have never encountered oil seeds, (examples of oil seeds are flax, millet, safflower, sunflower and hemp seeds) and if they have it most likely isn't available year round or in large quantities.

Nutritional requirements needed for wild birds are also much different then our companion or aviary birds. In the wild, parrots and parakeets use higher levels of energy to maintain body temperature and metabolic functions, avoid predators, find food & fly long distance, unlike our captive birds.

The following information provided is to help you better understand why you shouldn't feed seed:

- Seeds do not contain adequate amounts of nutrients that your companion bird requires. In fact, they are deficient in 32 important ingredients from different groups (protein, fiber, vitamins, minerals, trace minerals, omega 3 fatty acids and vitamin precursors).
- A diet with improper nutrition can cause feathers to be dull in appearance.
- A diet containing only 5.5% fat is widely accepted among avian specialists as ideal. Seeds and nuts usually contain 50-60% fat.
- A diet high in fat can trigger hormonal activities such as aggression and abundant egg laying. Keep in mind most wild birds only lay once a year due to the energy constraints it puts on their body.
- By feeding your bird an unhealthy diet you increase the risk of obesity, nutritionally related diseases, such as liver or kidney disease, and lessen your bird's ability to fight off infection, resulting in a shorting life for your bird
- The effort made by you to convert the diet away from seeds, nuts and treats are worth it for your companion birds' health and your peace of mind.