

# SIGNS OF ILLNESS IN COMPANION BIRDS

## INTRODUCTION

Early signs of illness in birds are subtle and easily missed. In the wild, a sick bird will hide evidence of illness in an attempt to avoid predation. This behavior is counterproductive in companion birds, as they can be ill for some time before symptoms are obvious to the owner. A bird that appears to die suddenly often has been sick for a while, with the caretaker unaware of the subtle signs of illness the bird has been displaying. For this reason, pet bird owners should familiarize themselves with early signs of illness in birds, and take note of any changes in their pet's normal routine. Early detection of illness allows for prompt medical attention and a more favorable outcome for your sick pet.

## Evaluation of Droppings

A change in your bird's droppings can be an indicator of a change in your bird's health. Always use paper towels or newspapers underneath your bird's cage and perches so that you can easily see the droppings. Replace the paper daily so that the number, volume, color, and consistency of the droppings can be noted.

### Normal Droppings

A bird's normal droppings will vary in appearance depending on its diet and what type of bird it is. Most parrots will have formed feces of a dull green color accompanied by varying amounts of clear urine and white urates. Eating berries or foods with food coloring may temporarily change the color of your bird's feces, and a diet high in moist foods will increase urine production.

### Abnormal Droppings

- Decrease in the total number or volume of droppings
- Color change of the urates (opaque portion of the urine) from white to green or yellow
- Liquid unformed feces (diarrhea)
- Increase in the urine portion (polyuria) independent of eating moist foods
- Presence of blood in the droppings
- A strong odor to the droppings (other than the first morning dropping)

Looser feces can be normal under some circumstances. Birds that eat nectar such as lorries and lorikeets will have more liquid feces. Birds laying eggs and baby birds on hand-feeding formulas will normally have looser stools. Similarly, a bird's first void of the morning is often larger and less formed than those that occur later in the day. Nervousness or stress can cause temporarily loose droppings that should resolve with removal of the stressor. We recommend you evaluate several droppings under normal circumstances before becoming alarmed.

## Monitoring Weight

Monitoring weight is one way to catch illnesses early. We recommend that all bird owners have an electronic gram scale and weigh their birds weekly. Rapid weight loss or weight gain is abnormal. If you notice a significant change in your bird's weight (+/-10%) then a visit to the veterinarian is warranted.



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## Early Signs of Disease in Birds

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The following signs indicate the need for a visit to an avian veterinarian.

- Redness, swelling or loss of feathers around eyes
- Crusty material in or around nares
- Stained feathers over nares (nostrils) or around the face or vent
- Flakiness on skin or beak
- Overgrowth of beak or nails
- Changes in vocalization, eating habits, or aggression
- Broken, bent, picked, or chewed feathers
- Unusual or dull feather color
- Prolonged molt
- Lameness or shifting of body weight
- Sores on bottom of feet

## Signs of Serious Illness

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

- Blood loss or injury
- Discharge from nares (nostrils), eyes, or mouth
- Labored breathing or abnormal respiratory sounds
- Decreased or excessive food or water consumption
- Loss of weight or general body condition
- Enlargement or swelling on the body
- Vomiting or regurgitation
- Significant reduction in the quantity and frequency of droppings, or a pronounced change in their odor or consistency
- Decreased vocalization and interest in social interaction
- Fluffed posture and sleeping more than normal
- Seizures or other neurologic abnormalities
- Inability to perch

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## Emergency First Aid

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An ill bird should be kept in a warm and quiet environment until veterinary care is available. Minimize handling and provide your bird with easily accessible food and water.

## Heat

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The ideal ambient temperature for most sick birds is 80°-85° degrees Fahrenheit (27°-29° Celsius). A temporary incubator can be made by placing a heating pad along the side of or underneath your bird's cage, then covering the cage with a towel, blanket, or cage cover. Space heaters or heat bulbs may be useful as well but can cause over-heating. Ensure that cage covers do not touch the heat source, and that your bird cannot chew on any electrical wires used. If the bird starts breathing rapidly or holds its wings away from its body, the temperature is too high and needs to be lowered. Avoid any heaters that emit fumes or smoke, as they can cause more harm than good.

## Food/Water

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It is important that sick birds continue to eat and drink unless they are regurgitating or vomiting. Place food and water within easy access of where your bird is perching or laying. If your pet is tame, offer favorite foods by hand. An electrolyte solution, such as warmed sports or pediatric electrolyte drinks can be offered drop by drop with a syringe or eye dropper.

## Mistakes to Avoid

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

## Have a Relationship with your Avian Veterinarian

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It is very helpful to have a relationship with an avian veterinarian before your bird gets sick. This will give you and the doctor important baseline information such as how much the bird usually weighs, how the bird usually acts at the veterinarian's office, and what test results are when the bird is well. It is also helpful to know the local emergency clinics that will see birds, and to post their phone numbers for family and friends.



## Postmortem Examination

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In the unfortunate event that your bird has passed away and you wish to find out what happened, the body should be refrigerated (not frozen) prior to transport to an avian veterinarian. Your veterinarian can perform various tests on the bird to help determine the cause of death. Knowing what did and did not cause your pet's death is an important part of protecting the health and safety of your family and the other birds in your home.

## In Closing...

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Bringing your bird to an avian veterinarian for well checks, noticing subtle changes in your bird's behavior, and acting quickly when you do see signs of illness are important factors in having your bird live a long and healthy life.

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## AAV: Setting a Standard in Avian Care Since 1980

Avian medicine is a distinct and very specialized field that requires extensive training, advanced skills, and facilities specifically designed and equipped to treat and hospitalize birds. The Association of Avian Veterinarians was established to provide veterinarians with this special education, and to keep them up to date with the latest information on bird health. The AAV holds an annual conference on avian medicine and publishes the peer-reviewed *Journal of Avian Medicine and Surgery*. AAV also makes annual contributions toward avian conservation and sponsors studies advancing the understanding of avian medicine.



## For More Information

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

- Avian Chlamydiosis and Psittacosis
- Veterinary Care for Your Pet Bird\*
- Basic Care for Companion Birds\*
- Behavior: Normal and Abnormal
- Caring for Backyard Chickens
- Digital Scales
- Feather Loss
- Feeding Birds
- Injury Prevention and Emergency Care
- Managing Chronic Egg-laying in Your Pet Bird
- Signs of Illness in Companion Birds\*
- Ultraviolet Lighting for Companion Birds
- When Should I Take My Bird to a Veterinarian?\*
- Zoonotic Diseases in Backyard Poultry\*

*\*Available in multiple languages. All others are available in English only at this time.*

## 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](https://twitter.com/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!