

THE SEMI- ANNUAL HEALTH MAINTENANCE CHECK-UP

Birds are phenomenally good at pretending to be healthy when they are not well, and because they can't talk, it is difficult for most bird owners to recognize that their bird is sick.

Furthermore, their feathers can hide otherwise obvious signs of weight loss or tumor development. Because birds are always eating it may be difficult for their caretakers to notice that their bird is eating less than normal. Consequently, it is even more important for birds to be periodically examined by a

veterinarian than it is for dogs and cats. The best approach to preventive medicine for birds is what we term a "healthy maintenance check-up". How extensive this check-up gets depends on the needs of each individual bird owner and it can be tailored to each owner's desires. The check-up could be as basic as a physical exam, cage evaluation, and nutritional consultation, or could involve in addition to the above, a blood screen, stool evaluation and x-rays. The health maintenance check-up provides the examining veterinarian with a chance to spot subtle signs of early disease and to administer therapy during the early stages of illness when treatment is most likely to be effective. If all test values are normal, your veterinarian can use these values as a normal baseline the he or she can compare with future test results.



A health maintenance check-up could include any of the following:

- Semi-annual physical exam and consult
- Stool parasite fecal test
- Red and white blood cell count
- Blood chemistry profile
- Psittacosis test
- X-rays

THE "SICK BIRD" DIAGNOSTIC EXAM

There are 5 parts to an avian diagnostic exam:

The History

The first part of a diagnostic exam involves taking a thorough history. The person bringing the bird to the veterinary clinic should be prepared to answer the following questions:

What is the major complaint for which the bird is being presented? How long has this problem been present?

Describe the bird's illness by stating in chronological order the appearance of the symptoms the bird is displaying. Have the symptoms been getting worse, better or remaining the same? Have any symptoms disappeared?

What does the bird eat? Has his or her appetite increased, decreased or remained the same?

Where is the bird's cage located? Does the bird leave his or her cage? If so, where is the bird able to fly to? Are there any poisonous plants or other forms of poison that the bird could make contact with?

Has the number of droppings your bird eliminates each day gone up, gone down, or has the number remained approximately the same? Have the droppings remained normal in size, consistency and color?

- Has your bird been as active and talkative as usual?
- Has your bird been drinking more water than normal?
- Has your bird's posture and gait remained normal?
- Has your bird been breathing normally?
- Has your bird been fluffing up more and keeping his or her eyes closed?

The Evaluation of the Bird from a Distance

Observing a sick bird from a distance while at the same time examining the bird's cage and bird's droppings can often provide your veterinarian with as many clues to the cause of the bird's problems as can the hands on physical. Cage hygiene, appearance of droppings, type of food, and cleanliness of water dish are all included

The "Hands on" Physical Exam

The physical exam involves capturing and weighing the bird and then examining the bird as quickly yet as thoroughly as is possible. The exam includes an inspection of the eyes, ears, nares, beak, throat, crop, breast, abdomen, wings, feet, cloaca, heart, lungs, and feathering.

Evaluating the bird's ability to handle stress

A healthy bird can easily handle the stress of capture, exam, blood collection and nail clipping and will recover rapidly within minutes, with few if any telltale signs. A sick bird, on the other hand, will often show signs of illness not present before the stress of handling. It will frequently become fluffed, close its eyes more often and display a labored breathing. A sick bird masquerading as a healthy bird may appear normal on physical examination, but the signs of illness may be discovered if the bird is carefully observed when it is returned to its cage.

Diagnostic Tests

Since very sick birds can appear normal even after a thorough physical exam, avian veterinarians must rely more on laboratory test procedures to make a diagnosis than do veterinarians who treat dogs and cats. These laboratory test procedures may include the following:

The Complete Blood count and Hemogram: The hemogram includes a red and white blood cell count, a serum protein determination, a blood parasite check, and an evaluation of the bird's serum and blood cell structure. From these results, the doctor can often tell whether the bird has an infection, an anemia, or is dehydrated or toxic.

Blood Chemistries: These test measure the biochemical parameters of the bird's body and can tell the doctor about the status of the liver and kidney, as well as the blood calcium and blood sugar levels, and much more.

Fecal Analysis: A fecal analysis includes macroscopic and microscopic examination of the bird's stool for worms, protozoan parasites, foreign material and the presence of blood and other abnormal pigments.

Urinalysis: Macroscopic, microscopic and chemical analysis of the urine.

Diagnostic X-rays: The use of x-rays in diagnosing bird diseases has become an extremely important part of avian medicine. X-rays have become part of the routine yearly or semi-annual health exam. By taking x-rays the doctor may be able to detect enlarged and displaced organs, tumors, fractures, foreign bodies in the digestive tract, pneumonia, egg binding, and much more. Using x-rays, your veterinarian can see almost any organ in the bird's body.

Gram stains and bacterial cultures: Bacterial infections can usually be treated successfully if diagnosed early and if the proper antibiotic is used. Gram stains, bacterial cultures, and antibiotic sensitivity testing allow the doctor to identify the infectious yeast or bacteria, and determine the most effective antibiotic. Gram stains and cultures help to take the guess work out of antibiotic therapy.

Cytology: Cytology is the microscopic examination of body tissues and fluids. By analyzing fluids and cells discharged from the bird's body, the cause of illness can sometimes be determined.

Serology: Serology is the measurement of antibodies in the bird's blood which the body produces to fight off certain bacteria and viruses, i.e., Psittacosis

Viral isolation: Viral cultures can be employed to determine the specific virus causing an infection. The type of test is much more involved and more expensive than bacterial cultures.

Histopathology: Histopathology is the microscopic examination of tissues made from biopsy samples.

PICKING THE RIGHT BIRD FOR YOU

Buying the right bird begins with deciding what type of bird best fits your needs and pocket book and then finding a reputable source where you can purchase a healthy pet that has been well cared for physically and psychologically.

If you have never owned a bird before, you should consider starting off learning about birds and bird care by purchasing a small bird such as a parakeet, cockatiel, or a canary. If you are more daring and adventurous or if you have already owned a small bird and would like to own a larger one, you should take an honest look at what you desire most in birds. Keep in mind that some of the larger breeds have a life span of up to 80 years; therefore, the bird you pick could remain in your family 3-4 generations. When you are deciding which bird is the right one for you, consider the following:

1. Do you want a bird that can learn to talk easily or a bird that does not talk but is pretty or has a pleasant song.
2. Find out of the bird's tendency is to be noisy or messy
3. Is the bird naturally friendly and easy to hand train?
4. Some birds develop such a close relationship with their owners they become jealous and demanding of their owners' time and attention. Do you want that sort of relationship? How much time are you willing to spend with your bird?
5. How big of a bird do you want? How much room do you have to house the bird? How much money are you willing to spend on purchasing the bird along with its cage and supplies?
6. Are you willing to spend more for a hand raised bird that is very easy to handle to and train? Are you willing to spend the extra time necessary to hand feed a baby bird while it is being weaned onto adult food?

Hook-billed birds are social animal and do poorly if placed in a cage by themselves where they are given very little attention by their owner. If you do not plan on handling your bird and developing a relationship with it, you should consider buying two birds so that they can keep each other company.

When buying a bird, it is important to find out as much as possible about the origin of your bird. If the bird has a "split band" on its foot, it is obviously a bird captured in the wild. The split band means that the bird was housed in a quarantine station before being allowed to enter this country. It means that the bird was exposed to many other birds before reaching its final destination. It also means the bird was not hand raised. If the bird you are considering purchasing is being sold as a "sexed" bird, papers should be provided documenting the bird's sex and indicating how the sexing was performed (surgically or through blood testing) and who performed the sexing. A tattooed wing is no proof at all that the bird was sexed.

ASK ABOUT THE BIRD'S PAST DIET a bird that has been exclusively raised on seeds is less likely to be healthy and resistant to disease. Ask the seller about the bird's personality and how easy the bird is to handle. If the bird is said to be tame, have the seller demonstrate how tame the bird is.

BE CLEAR ABOUT ANY WARRANTY THE SELLER PROVIDES Is the warranty in writing? Understand the conditions of the warranty. Many pet stores require that the bird be examined by a veterinarian within a certain period of time after the sale for the warranty to remain in effect. If your bird becomes sick during the warranty period most sellers will take the bird back and treat it themselves, but they can not be expected to pay for veterinary bills incurred by the new owner. Buy your bird from a person, or an establishment, that is clean, caring and knowledgeable about birds; preferably one with an established reputation. Keep in mind that any warranty is worthless if you cannot find the seller when the bird becomes ill or dies.

BUY A BIRD ONLY FROM A RELIABLE SOURCE. Birds that are bargains are often birds that have been smuggled into this country. These birds may have a serious behavioral problem and are more likely to be diseased. Please understand that the best breeders, pet stores and wholesalers cannot detect a sick bird if the bird is masking the signs of illness and appears asymptomatic. So if you have the unfortunate experience of buying a bird that turns out to be sick, don't think that the seller put one over on you, he probably had no idea the bird was ill. For this reason a complete post purchase exam by an avian veterinarian is very important and should be performed as soon as possible after purchase.

HAVE YOUR BIRD EXAMINED BY A VETERINARIAN who has a special interest in birds and who has received extensive training in the area of caged bird medicine. Birds are different creatures from dogs and cats and it takes numerous hours of post graduate study for a veterinarian to become proficient in avian medicine and to continue to keep abreast of the rapid changes that are taking place in this exciting field. Most veterinarians with an expertise and sincere interest in caged birds belong to the Association of Avian Veterinarians. (AAV)

THE EXTENT OF THE POST PURCHASE EXAM may be determined by the value of your bird. A physical exam is important, but it is just the first step. New owners of the more expensive species should consider blood testing, gram staining, cultures and x-rays in addition to the physical exam. A blood test for Psittacosis is important both to protect your investment, and to protect the health of you and your family.

TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF DISEASE, anytime you bring a new bird into your house that already contains other birds, the new bird must be quarantined for at least 2 months. This is important in order to prevent spread of infection if the new bird turns out to be carrying a contagious disease.

THE WEEKLY HOME EXAM

It is extremely important that bird owners continually evaluate the health of their birds by giving a weekly or even a daily home exam. However, before an owner can hope to recognize abnormal signs, he or she must first learn to recognize the bird's normal behavior and appearance. In the paragraphs to follow I will give you some basic guidelines on what to look for when performing a home examination.

POSTURE: When perching, a bird should maintain a relatively erect vertical position as opposed to a horizontal crouched posture. The wing tips should cross over the back, and the tail

feathers should continue on a straight line with the back. Birds that are sick may sit with either one or both wings drooped, with the tail directed downward, and with the tail bobbing or flicking with each breath. Wobbliness, restlessness, favoring one leg, or shifting weight from one leg to another, is an indication of pain or dysfunction.

ATTITUDE: A bird showing decreased activity, decreased playfulness, and decreased talking or singing is usually not healthy. Personality changes such as increased friendliness, or increased aggressiveness and irritability, should be viewed with suspicion.

BREATHING: A healthy bird breathes with very little effort and little or no sound. Breathing hard while at rest, or breathing heavily for prolonged periods after exertion or exercise, indicates a health problem. Breathing noises such as clicking, wheezing and frequent sneezing are familiar symptoms of illness. The incessant, high pitched squeaking, sometimes heard in parakeets, may be due to a thyroid gland enlargement (a goiter) pressing on the windpipe. A nasal discharge may appear as dried plugs in the nostrils, fluid in the nostrils, or straining of the tiny feathers just above the nostrils. A bird with its mouth open and gasping is seriously ill and must be handled with extreme caution.

DIGESTIVE BEHAVIOR: A bird that is not eating well is at great risk due to its very rapid metabolic rate. Consequently, its health may deteriorate rapidly if food intake is not resumed. It is important to check daily that your bird is eating and to determine how much is consumed. A bird may pick at its food cup but actually be eating. It is important to determine if the seeds are being hulled or if they are just being scooped out of the dish onto the floor of the cage. A bird may even hull the seed and not eat it, so check the seed cup and bottom of the cage for seed hulls while also making sure there is not an increased amount of hulled seed present. Regurgitation is a normal part of courtship behavior. During courtship, regurgitated seeds may be seen on or near the toys or mirror.

However, vomited seed in sticky clusters throughout the cage, or adhering to the bars of the cage, could be evidence of a health problem such as "sour crop" or "crop impaction". Unhealthy birds tend to over indulge on grit and this tendency often results in crop impaction. Therefore, eliminate grit from the diet of sick birds, and don't mistake grit consumption for food consumption. You should periodically feel the size and consistency of your bird's crop in order to recognize when an abnormal condition is developing.

WATER CONSUMPTION: Most birds do not drink large amounts of water, but they do require a clean source of water changed daily. Birds that begin to drink excessively may be developing kidney disease, diabetes, or a digestive tract disturbance.

ELIMINATION: Droppings are an excellent reflection of a bird's condition. Changes in the appearance of the droppings, or the number of droppings, may be early warning signs that things are not normal. To develop a sense of what constitutes a normal dropping for your bird, check the cage papers daily. The number of droppings should be fairly consistent, but the consistency and color of the droppings will vary with the type of food being consumed. A reduction in the number of droppings indicates reduced food intake and consequently a problem. If the type of

food has remained consistent, but the consistency or color of the droppings has changed, disease is most likely present.

FEATHERS: A normal healthy bird will be alert and bright eyed. It will have sleek, clean, well groomed, non tattered feathers which are held close to the body. Birds that are sick and chilled usually puff up their feathers in order to trap heat and keep themselves warm. Birds that are fluffed up and huddled on the bottom of the cage are usually too weak to perch and should be considered critically ill. The feathers around the vent should be clean and free of droppings. Feathers that stick out may be broken or may be sticking out as a result of a tumor or cyst. A prolonged molt is sometimes evidence that a health problem exists. Pin feathers that never develop into fully expanded mature feathers could indicate the onset of Beak and Feather Disease.

BEAK & CERE: A bird's beak grows continually and with normal activity should not overgrow. If it becomes overgrown, it must be trimmed or the bird may not be able to eat properly. If the texture of the beak changes or the beak begins to grow rapidly or unevenly, disease should be suspected. If the beak develops brown spots, crusts, scales, enlargements or if a misaligned bite is present, veterinary assistance is indicated. If the bird's cere becomes rough, flaky and thickened, or if the nostrils become narrower, see your veterinarian.

MOUTH: If you are able to open your bird's mouth, check out the underside of the bird's beak for abnormal areas of softness and erosion which could be indicative of Beak and Feather Disease. Examine the appearance of your bird's normally thick tongue, and the characteristic "V" shaped slit in the soft palate. White circular patches on the back of the mouth could indicate the presence of a yeast or Pox virus infection.

EYES: Your bird's eyes should be bright and open wide. Blinking should occur periodically, but frequent blinking with lids shut for more than an instant should be a warning sign that something is not right. A bird that appears to be frequently "nodding 'out" is often quite ill. Swollen reddened eyelids, and a discharge around the eyes, are signs of conjunctivitis, a condition which frequently accompanies upper respiratory diseases.

FEET AND LEGS: The skin of your bird's legs should be smooth and not crusty. Unusual crustiness or flakiness may indicate malnutrition or a mite infestation that should be professionally evaluated. Pressure sores and subsequent infections develop on the bottoms of the feet usually as a result of improper perch size or material. If you notice weight shifting, or redness, swelling, or discoloration of the feet or toes, veterinary care should be sought quickly. Leg bands and over grown nails can be easily caught, with resultant bleeding, leg fractures or dislocations.

BREAST BONE AND SURROUNDING BREAST MUSCLE: Feel the protrusion of your bird's breast boned down the center of the chest. Note the thickness of the musculature on either side of the center line. If your bird becomes ill and starts to lose weight, the breast musculature will become less full and the breastbone will be more prominent.

WEIGHING YOUR BIRD REGULARLY at the same time each day, on a scale that measure in grams, is one way of detecting illness before other physical symptoms become apparent. A progressive weight loss for 2 consecutive days should prompt you to have your bird examined. Small birds may be weighed on a "gram" scale (used for measuring food portions) by placing the bird in a bag (with air holes). Weigh the bird in the bag, and then subtract the weight of the bag. Larger birds must be taught to stand on the scale.

Keeping a diary of your bird's weight and daily number of droppings may save your pet's life. Remember, determining the exact weight is not as important as determining if your bird is gaining or losing weight. Never assume that your bird is maintaining its weight just because it appears to be eating and does not look thin.