
AVIAN & EXOTIC CLINIC
of the Monterey Peninsula

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Aspergillosis in Birds

Aspergillosis is a disease caused by the fungus *Aspergillus*. It is acquired from the environment and not from other animals.

The *Aspergillus* fungus is present almost everywhere in nature, but especially thrives in warm, moist environments. The tiny spores become airborne and can easily spread from one area to another. Birds are exposed to *Aspergillus* spores on a regular basis. For birds with a healthy immune system this is not a problem, as they are protected from infection. However, birds with a compromised immune system may be susceptible to *Aspergillus* infection. Certain species of birds are more prone to developing aspergillosis, including waterfowl, mynah birds, African Grey parrots, Amazon parrots, and birds of prey.

Certain conditions can predispose a bird to developing aspergillosis. Chronic stress, unsanitary conditions, overcrowding, malnutrition, and overuse of certain medications can contribute to fungal infection. Respiratory irritants such as cigarette smoke, disinfectant fumes, and aerosol sprays damage birds' respiratory systems and increase their susceptibility to *Aspergillus*. Birds that are otherwise ill, or are very young or very old, are also susceptible to aspergillosis.

Aspergillosis usually affects the respiratory tract of birds. Birds with this disease typically exhibit chronic weight loss and difficulty breathing. Other symptoms can include open-mouthed breathing, tail bobbing, and labored breathing after exercise. In severe cases the mucous membranes can turn blue. Voice changes or unusual breathing noises can also occur. Additional signs include poor appetite, abnormal droppings, neurological disorders, and regurgitation. Other signs and symptoms will vary, depending on which other organs are involved.

Diagnosis of aspergillosis can be challenging. There is no one definitive test for *Aspergillus* infection. Veterinarians use information gathered from a thorough history and physical examination to determine if a bird is at risk for aspergillosis. Definitive diagnosis of this disease may require blood tests, cultures, and endoscopic examinations.

Treatment of aspergillosis can be difficult. The success of treatment depends upon the location and extent of the infection. The earlier a diagnosis can be made the better the prognosis for recovery. Treatment will include oral antifungal medications, and may include nebulization therapy or surgery. Therapy is long term and will need to be continued for weeks to months.

Owners can help prevent aspergillosis by providing their pet birds with a clean environment and healthy diet. Keep your bird in a well-ventilated and dry environment. Food and water dishes should be cleaned daily with soap and water. Avoid corn cob litter, as it promotes fungal growth. Feed your bird a pelleted diet rather than seed, and offer a variety of fresh fruit and vegetables. Make sure your bird is not exposed to smoke or other air pollutants.

Bird owners know their bird's behavior better than anyone, and can detect subtle changes in their pets' activity level, voice quality, or appetite. Any abnormal change in your bird's behavior or voice should be immediately brought to your veterinarian's attention.