



THE CENTER FOR

BIRD & EXOTIC ANIMAL MEDICINE

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IS MY BIRD SICK?

Birds, like all animals, are susceptible to a variety of bacterial, viral, fungal, metabolic and neoplastic diseases. Unlike traditional domestic animals (dogs, cats, cows, horses and so on) that usually act sick when they are, birds try very hard to hide their illness. Although they live in our homes, birds are still essentially wild animals, and an ill or injured bird in the wild would attract the attention of predators. This programming cannot be overridden despite a lack of predator and an intrinsic fear of “becoming lunch”. They often maintain this “I’m okay” attitude until they are critically ill, weak to the point that they do not have the strength to hide disease any longer. As a result, many bird owners need to be aware of small, subtle changes that may signal illness.

So how will you know if your bird is ill? Start by observing and making a mental note of your healthy bird’s normal behavior and habits. Once you know normal, it will be easier to spot abnormal.

Behavior: This will probably give you your first hint that something is not right. A normal bird is active, vocal and interested in its surroundings. A sick bird may also act this way when you are present, but not when it is alone: Watch from around the corner or across the room to observe your bird when it doesn’t think its being seen. If it sits or stands with its feathers fluffed, appears sleepy for extended periods of time or huddles despite a normal, warm environment, it is likely feeling pain, discomfort or general malaise. Sitting on the cage floor for a length of time is a reliable indicator that the bird is not feeling well. A sick bird is usually quieter than normal, not talking or screaming, and even changes in voice from what is normal can all be indicators of illness. A sick bird may want more petting than usual or a usually cuddly bird may not want to be touched. It is these changes in behavior and patterns that suggest something is wrong.

Droppings: A normal bird dropping has three components. The dark, solid portion is feces. The white part is urates. The clear liquid portion is urine. The color of the solid portion may change, depending on what it has eaten. However, the volume and firmness should remain the same. Most species of birds should have a “tubular shaped” stool, with a firm, but not dry, consistency. A lack of solid consistency to the feces is true diarrhea, and is cause for concern; watch for color, shape and texture. One or two abnormal droppings are usually nothing to worry about, but consistently abnormal droppings over an entire day or two would warrant a call to the vet. Blood in the droppings is always abnormal.

The white portion should always be white/cream colored. Changes in urate color may indicate disease or poisoning, and they may change color from white or cream to yellow, green or red/orange. The amount of clear urine may increase with high fluid intake or as a result of disease. Kidney disease can produce either increased or decreased urine production and can increase or decrease water intake.

Appetite: Many birds will maintain their appetite until the day they die, but even a small decrease in appetite should be taken as a potential sign of disease. Some ill birds will stop eating their regular diet and eat only one food. Gorging on grit, if available (not recommended) or other non-digestible items are a cause for concern. Others will stop eating altogether. Occasionally a bird will drink a lot but not eat, a sign of serious disease.

Body condition: Pick up bird and run your finger down the center of the breast. You should be able to feel the keel bone running from chest to abdomen. A healthy bird should have muscle on either side of the bone. A bird that has lost weight will have a very “pointy” sharp chest, or even small depressions immediately to each side of the point of the keel. Feel your healthy bird’s keel so you will know how normal feels and will be able to recognize abnormal when it occurs. Weight loss can be significant in birds in a very short amount of time, as little as a day or two, depending on the disease. Weight loss is a sure sign that something is wrong.