

Mature Cockatiel Behavior

My cockatiel is laying eggs without male involvement.

Q: Our 7-month-old cockatiel is on her second round of laying eggs. There is no male involvement. What prompted this early egg-laying, and can we give her anything to avoid this?

Linda S. Rubin explains:

Most female cockatiels desire to lay eggs at some point in their lives; usually by their first birthday or shortly thereafter. Although younger birds lay eggs, it is slightly unusual for a 7-month old female to begin laying this early. If your cockatiel is banded with a traceable, closed leg band you can find out from the breeder her exact birthday.

Once your female cockatiel reaches physical maturation, factors that contribute to her laying eggs include the photolight period or amount of daylight hours, humidity and temperature levels, dietary influences, the presence of a mate and a suitable nesting site. Although it may appear that some of these factors may fall short, that really depends upon your cockatiel's point of view. For example, given enough daylight, average room temperatures, increased humidity (such as bathing opportunities), soft foods that resemble seeds in the milky stage (eaten during the rainy season in the wild), pair bonding with you or another perceived "mate," and access to a nesting site – like the bottom of the cage to a bookshelf to under the bed – all can fill the bill.

To deter egg-laying, simply reverse some or most of these factors. For example, are you keeping your cockatiel up late at night or not allowing her to sleep in a dark, quiet area for at least 10 or more hours a day? If you currently spray mist her daily, reduce bathing opportunities. Never cut back on nutrition. However, temporarily stopping soft foods, such as cooked corn or soft fresh foods might help – but provide other nutritious treats that are less like nesting food.

Some cockatiel owners are unaware that the way in which they touch their cockatiel may be physically stimulating. For example, rubbing or touching the back of a female cockatiel may imitate a male jumping on to her back to mate. Avoid touching the lower back or rump, or under the tail, whenever handling your bird. If your cockatiel is seeking out unusual areas in which to lay eggs, restrict these areas; if she is tearing up paper at the bottom of the cage (because she is arranging her nest), replace it immediately with fresh paper or use some other form of cage litter.

Cockatiels are creatures of habit, and one way to disrupt a hen's routine is to move her to an unfamiliar cage. Because it takes a while to adapt, egg-laying may be interrupted. However, in more severe cases, a female will continue laying eggs – even off the perch.

Never take a cockatiel's eggs away once they are laid. Removing eggs prematurely will cause a cockatiel to lay an additional clutch to replace the eggs she has lost. This is nature's way of replacing the gene pool. Always allow a cockatiel to sit on her eggs for as long as she wishes – until she chooses on her own to abandon them. In more severe cases of constant egg-laying, you may need to dramatically decrease the number of daylight hours or take your cockatiel to an experienced avian veterinarian. In life-threatening situations, older birds may require hormone shots or even a hysterectomy. To locate an avian veterinarian near you, contact the Association of Avian Veterinarians at <http://www.aav.org/>.