

Bird Health - Air Health For You And Your Bird

Don't let dust, dander, and everything in between, leave you and your bird breathless.

By Rebecca Sweat

Keep the air in your home clean for your health and your bird's.

Kristy Goodwin loved cockatiels. She had about 40 of them in cages scattered throughout her living room, kitchen and bedroom. She had 30 more in a large flight in her sunroom, which was located just off her living room, and 10 in a smaller flight on her back porch. There were 20 additional cockatiel pairs in breeder cages in Goodwin's spare bedroom and study. With cockatiels literally filling the house from one end of her house to the other, there was also a lot of feather dust and dried droppings floating around the air.

"I knew the air wasn't exactly clean, but I wasn't bothered by it," Goodwin admitted. "I was totally crazy about the cockatiels, and I just figured the bird dander was something I had to learn to live with."

Five years into her cockatiel-keeping, however, Goodwin found herself sneezing a lot, even when she didn't have a cold and it wasn't hay fever season. Several times she woke up in the middle of the night with a dry, wispy cough in her upper chest, coughing to the point that she couldn't get back to sleep. She felt sniffly, headachy, tired and generally miserable. That went on for many months. Then one night she had an all-out respiratory attack, which left her gasping for breath and resulted in a trip to the emergency room.

"Both the emergency room doctor and my regular physician told me the same thing — I needed to get rid of my cockatiels," Goodwin said tearfully. The doctors told her that her lungs had been damaged so much by the bird debris she had been breathing in that she had sustained irreparable damage. If Goodwin kept her birds, she could lose all her lung capacity and die.

Goodwin wasn't the only one in the house suffering. Gigi, her blue-and-gold macaw, was also experiencing health problems. "I had had Gigi for about 20 years, long before I had gotten into cockatiel breeding, and she had always been in perfect health," Goodwin related. "But about the same time I started having health problems, I noticed Gigi was wheezing a lot and doing the open-mouth breathing." She took Gigi to her veterinarian, who confirmed Goodwin's suspicions: Gigi was just as allergic to cockatiels as she was.

Goodwin's story is a case in point. Sooner or later, if you're breathing impure air, your health is going to suffer. And chances are, if you're being impacted, your bird is, too.

Bird Keeper's Lung

What can happen when someone consistently inhales "bird air?" A small percentage of people, probably less than half of one percent of all bird owners, develop a respiratory hypersensitivity reaction (allergic reaction) to inhalation of airborne dust from bird feathers, dust, dander and dried droppings. In the medical field, the condition is referred to as Extrinsic Allergic Alveolitis (EAA) or Hypersensitivity Pneumonitis (HP). It is more commonly known as bird keeper's lung.

Specifically, EAA is an allergic reaction to the protein found in organic avian matter. "When birds flap their wings, all those proteins go up into the air and when people inhale them, they can develop an allergy," noted Washington state avian veterinarian Cathy Johnson-Delaney, DVM.

This condition is usually associated with keeping birds indoors, particularly heavy powder-producing birds such as cockatiels, cockatoos, African greys and pigeons. It is more likely to be a problem in situations where there are a large number of birds kept in a small area, and the cages or flights are not well maintained. People with allergies and asthma are most susceptible to this disease.

There is both an acute and chronic form of EAA. "The acute form causes a severe respiratory attack, similar to an asthma attack, where your bronchials contract and your respiratory tract shuts down or collapses, and suddenly you can't breathe," said Larry Nemetz, DVM, a birds-only veterinarian in Southern California.

The acute form usually develops when an individual suddenly becomes exposed to an overwhelming amount of bird dust. It could be that the person is cleaning an enclosed cockatiel aviary that hasn't been cleaned for a month, and a lot of fecal matter and other debris has been allowed to build up. A few hours after cleaning the aviary, the individual may start

coughing and breathing hard, and develop a fever and/or chills. Normally, this is just a temporary condition. If exposure is stopped at this point, no treatment is usually needed, and the individual will return to normal.

Chronic, low-grade exposure is much more serious. Chronic EAA often develops in people who have regular or repeated exposure to a high concentration of bird dust and dander. With this form of EAA, the allergens damage the respiratory tract by “inflaming the bronchi and closing off the lungs,” Johnson-Delaney explained, “but it does so at the level of the alveoli, which is your air exchange area, and it will thicken them so that you can’t get air.”

Once chronic EAA starts setting in, permanent, irreversible lung lesions develop, leaving the individual scarred for life. At first, the only outward symptoms may be mild sneezing or coughing, lack of energy and weight loss. As the disease progresses, the individual loses more and more lung capacity, and breathing becomes increasingly difficult. Chronic EAA can develop in as little as two years, although it takes 10 to 20 years for most people to develop the severe form.

“If you don’t pay attention to it, EAA can kill you,” Johnson-Delaney warned, “because, eventually, you will have no lung capacity left.” Chronic EAA is survivable, she added, but you have to recognize and address the problem early, before your lungs become too scarred. “Don’t ignore early symptoms because by the time advanced symptoms develop, it may be too late,” stressed Johnson-Delaney.

In most cases, those diagnosed with severe cases of chronic EAA have no choice but to give up their birds. Some patients may also be advised to eliminate exposure to all bird protein altogether, which may involve removing chicken eggs from their diet and avoiding parks or city streets where pigeons are present. They may also need to take corticosteroids for the rest of their life to help clean their airways open.

People with milder cases of chronic EAA may need to remove their birds from their home temporarily and go on steroids for a while, but eventually they may be able to resume bird-keeping. Even then, doctors advise avoiding the high-powder species and to hire someone to clean out the cages for them.

Unfortunately for Goodwin, it’s too late for preventative measures. “I realize now that I had way too many cockatiels in my house, but I didn’t want to give any of them up,” she conceded. “I had one cheap air filter in my living room, but it obviously wasn’t effective.”

Goodwin took her doctor’s advice and found homes for all her cockatiels, as well as her macaw. Since then, her health has improved dramatically. “Giving up my birds was the hardest thing I ever had to do,” she said. “That may not have had to happen if I started limiting the number of birds I was keeping a long time ago.” It’s a difficult lesson to learn, but one all bird owners should take note of. Clean air is a key component of good health — and not something to be taken for granted.