

## Mouth Bacteria Poses Danger To Pet Birds

**Other pets and human mouths can have bacteria potentially dangerous to pet birds.**

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**Q:** I always hear a lot about the bacteria inside of a cat's mouth and how it can be a danger to pet birds. To what degree is this true, and how does the bacteria affect a pet bird? What about my dog's mouth?

**A:** Good question. Some of our other pets carry some potentially nasty and dangerous bacteria: Gram-negative rods, including *Pasteurella*, *Pseudomonas*, *E. coli* and *Enterobacter*; and Gram-positive cocci, including *Staphylococcus* and *Streptococcus*.

Courtesy of Mike Allison, Pennsylvania

Dogs and cats can cause serious injury to pet birds through bite wounds. Animal mouths are filled with potentially dangerous bacteria that transfers to a bird's blood stream through a scratch or bite. Most healthy animals and humans have millions of microorganisms in the mouth, many of which are harmless. Pets with dental disease – such as periodontal disease, tooth decay, tooth root abscesses, dental tartar or plaque and gingivitis (which are increasingly more common as pets age, especially if they do not undergo routine dental cleanings) – are more likely to harbor dangerous bacteria and fungi, which can be introduced to birds through a bite wound.

The millions of bacteria and fungi in a healthy human mouth are, for the most part, harmless to us. The majority of these organisms, however can potentially cause disease in pet birds under certain circumstances.

I have seen too many home videos of a pet bird eating from its owner's mouth or picking its owner's teeth. This is a dangerous and unfunny practice. It is a bad idea to expose a pet bird to unnecessary organisms that can cause illness. If you want to scare yourself, have a look on the Internet at some papers discussing the bacteria involved with dental disease in humans!

### Claws & Paws

It's not only the mouths of other pets that can be dangerous to birds but also their paws and claws. Even small parrots have formidable beaks that can deter a predator with a good chomp, but it isn't a foolproof defense. We still see cases of birds that were injured by claws and teeth. Claws can cause serious puncture wounds and often contain bacteria from the soil, the litter box or even the animal's skin.

Birds do possess a nifty defense mechanism to help defend it from predators. When a real or perceived predator grabs and holds the tail, a bird will release its tail feathers. (Some readers may have experienced this after trying to catch an escaping pet bird by grasping the tail feathers and ended up with nothing but a handful of feathers!) This is similar to some lizard species' autotomy defense mechanism, which allows a lizard to drop the end section of its tail. The tail continues to wiggle, distracting the predator and hopefully allowing the lizard to escape.

The birds' defense mechanism doesn't always prevent wounds. Any bite or claw wound through the skin is potentially dangerous for several reasons. The skin of birds is very thin and delicate compared to that of humans. Bird skin doesn't have a lot of blood vessels, which can be a good thing, because a bird usually won't lose a lot of blood through a skin tear or puncture. On the other hand, this means that the normal flushing of a wound by bleeding won't occur. The more a wound bleeds, the more the body can flush out potentially harmful bacteria and fungi.

Wounds that puncture the muscle layer or injure follicles or internal structures of a pet bird are much more serious. Bacteria or fungi can be deposited into the deeper tissues, and if the skin closes up over the puncture, the organisms can multiply and cause a serious infection to a bird.

Once the bacteria enter the bird's body, they can set up a local abscess or spread through the bloodstream to other organ systems. This is called septicemia, and it usually proves fatal, even if medical therapy is provided.

Be First-Aid Ready

Owners never should wait if they suspect that their pet bird has been bitten or clawed by another animal. If an injury occurs, then it is imperative that you immediately perform first aid.