

Bird Obesity Facts

Birds can develop weight problems too

By Rebecca Sweat

Certain bird species, like Amazon parrots, are more prone to obesity than others. Courtesy Amy & Tony Auletto, New Hampshire

Most pet birds have life pretty easy. They sit on their perch, get a few bites to eat, snooze a little, chew on a wooden toy for a bit, snack some more and rest some more. Probably the vast majority of a parrot's day is spent in a cage no more than three times its wingspan, without a lot of space for flapping its wings or crawling around. A lot of times its cage is over-loaded with treats, and it may be given fattening human snacks like chips, french fries and buttery popcorn as well. Before you know it, Polly's become one plump pet.

Big Weight, Big Problem

"Birds develop weight problems for the same reason people do — too many calories and too little exercise," said Larry Nemetz, DVM, an avian-only veterinarian in California. "Most pet birds have food available all the time, so they don't have to work for their dinner. And because they don't have a lot of other things to do, they just sit around and rest."

As a result, most veterinarians cite obesity as the No. 1 health problem in pet birds. Gregory Burkett, DVM, for one, who has a private practice in North Carolina, said approximately 50 percent of his avian patients are overweight — meaning they are 5 to 20 percent above their ideal body weight. He is seeing an increased number of birds that are obese as well — meaning they are more than 20 percent above their ideal body weight.

Any pet bird can become fat, but certain species are more prone to weight problems than others. Amazon parrots, rose-breasted cockatoos, cockatiels, canaries, quaker parrots and budgerigars appear to be much more prone to obesity than other birds, according to Burkett.

In contrast, the same species' wild counterparts normally weigh much less. "In the wild, many species of parrots would eat a large quantity of low-fat fruits and vegetables, and very little seed or nuts," noted Missouri veterinarian Julie Burge, DVM. "Birds that survive mostly on seeds, such as cockatiels and budgies, would fly miles a day to burn off the calories from the fat. Some species, such as macaws, may eat a lot of nuts, but they also would fly and use the extra calories."

One way to control your pet bird's weight is through a regular exercise program. "The more active your bird is, the more calories he's going to burn and the better shape he's going to be in," said Florida bird behavior consultant Kim Bear. Granted, you're probably not going to be able take Tweety with you on a jog around the block like you could with your dog. You can, however, get your bird up and moving with some fun, interactive games.

How much exercise does your bird need? If your bird is healthy, Bear recommends you play with it three times a day, with each play session lasting about five to 10 minutes. You might have one play session before you go to work in the morning and then another when you get home in the evening. If possible, come home at lunch and have another play session in the middle of the day.

Let's Get A Physical

Of course before you put your bird on an exercise program, take it to the veterinary clinic for a physical examination including bloodwork. This is especially important if your bird has been a "perch potato" its whole life. "You want to know if you have a healthy parrot, and to make sure any kind of extra physical activity is not going to be harmful," Burge said. She suggests you start off your exercise regimen slowly.

"If your bird is overweight or has health problems, you may only be able to do one or two sessions a day that are only five seconds each," cautioned Michelle Karras, a bird behavior consultant in Illinois. After your bird is OK with five-second exercise sessions, you can extend it to 10-second exercise periods. "As your parrot's physical condition continues to strengthen, you can gradually help him build up to doing longer and longer exercise sessions," Karras said. If your bird is breathing heavily or panting at any point, it is time to stop.

If your bird is overweight, your veterinarian will be able to give you some guidelines for a how much exercise your bird needs and can handle. Your veterinarian will also want to make some dietary changes as well.

“If you are serious about helping your bird lose weight, you really need to have a two-pronged approach,” Nemetz said. “You need to restrict your bird’s caloric intake in addition to increasing physical activity.” For most psittacine species, that means getting it on a formulated diet (which is lower in fat than most seed diets) and limiting seed treats, fruit and high-fat people foods.