

## Water & Your Pet Bird: What You Should Know

**When 75 percent of your parrot's body is made up of water, you need to read all about it.**

*By Rebecca Sweat*

Courtesy Larry Abramson, Mississippi  
Clean water is an essential part in keeping your bird healthy and happy.

You've probably heard the expression, "You are what you eat."

But perhaps just as important is the quality of water that is consumed. Water — clean, fresh and in ample supplies — is essential to nearly every process of your pet bird's body.

"Water is probably the most important overlooked nutrient of any animal," said Julie Burge, DVM, a private practice veterinarian in Missouri. "A bird can live a lot longer without food than it can without water."

Approximately 75 percent of a bird's body is made up of water. Each day, an adult bird needs to drink enough water to make up 5 percent of its body weight to replace the water lost from waste removal, respiration and evaporation.

Water performs a number of important functions. "The normal physiological processes that go on need water to occur," explained North Carolina veterinarian Gregory Burkett, DVM. "The insides of cells are water, so if a bird doesn't drink enough water, then the water that's inside of those cells leaches out because the body needs to use it, and then the cells dry up like raisins and die."

Water is also needed to flush out the parrot's body, remove excess minerals and other wastes, to transport nutrients throughout the body and to help regulate body temperature. Without enough water, the blood volume will drop and the kidneys, liver and heart will not function as efficiently as they should.

### Importance Of Clean Water

But for pet birds in particular, often the bigger issue is not so much being provided with enough water as it is making sure they have clean water. (Most pet owners make sure there's water in the cage.) An owner may get busy and forget to change the bird's water dishes in a couple days. Meanwhile the bird may have defecated in the water, taken a bath in it, shredded newspaper from the bottom of the cage and put that in the water, rinsed its beak in the bowl after eating, dunked pellets or crackers in the water to soften them, or perhaps a fly flew into the water dish and is now floating on top.

Any of the above-mentioned "debris" in a pet bird's water dish can create an ideal breeding ground for bacteria. "Bacteria love to grow in filthy water," Burge said. "Most birds will defecate or dunk food in their water dish. These organic materials feed the bacteria and cause them to grow even faster."

Bacterial growth is measured in doubling time — the time it takes for bacteria to double in number. According to Burkett, doubling time for many bacteria is two to three hours. In practical terms, this means if you put a clean water dish in the cage at 8 a.m. and at 9 a.m. the bird takes a drink, any food material that was on its beak — any bacteria — gets in the water. "By noon, whatever amount of bacteria that's in there has doubled, and that doubles again and doubles again so that by 5 p.m. there's enough bacteria in there to make any bird sick," Burkett said.

Probably the most common water-borne bacteria is *Pseudomonas*. Other types of bacteria, such as *E.coli*, *Klebsiella*, *Giardia* and *Salmonella*, can also grow in water. Any of these can cause diarrhea or other digestive tract disturbances, as well as more serious infections.

Whether or not a bird becomes ill from ingesting bacteria depends on the quantity that is taken in, noted Brian Speer, DVM, an avian veterinarian in California and co-author of *Birds for Dummies* (IDG Books, 1999). "We and our birds consume bacteria that could cause disease everyday," he said. "But the reason it doesn't make us sick is we're taking in very limited numbers — we're only drinking five or 10 organisms. But if we drink contaminated water, we may be drinking five billion organisms, and that probably would be too much for our immune system to handle."

For instance, a normal amount of Salmonella exposure might be 10 organisms a day — something your parrot's body can handle. But if Salmonella is proliferating in the water your pet bird drinks, it might take in 10 million organisms in one swig of water, and it would probably come down with a Salmonella infection as a result.

Oftentimes, it's pretty obvious that your bird's water dish is dirty: You can see the crud floating on top of the water. But even without any obvious debris, the water may very well be contaminated. The way you can tell, Burge said, is "if you rub your finger on the inside of the water dish and it feels slimy, that means bacteria is growing in there. Or, if you see discolored areas in a plastic dish, that's probably bacteria as well."

When providing water to your birds, you have two main options: bowls and crocks or water bottles. "Each of those sources of water — bottles, crocks, bowls, etc., can and do work fine," Speer said. "Each also has some degree of inherent risks. Inattention on either side can lead to catastrophe."