

Feather Loss May Be Giardia

Quarantine a new pet bird to protect your other birds from disease.

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP, Avian Practice

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Q: My cockatiel is roughly 3 years old. I was given him a few months ago. He is bald under his wings but, other than this, he seems in good health and so do the other two cockatiels with which he shares a cage. I would be grateful for any advice. I've never noticed him plucking his feathers.

Quarantine all new birds to protect your other birds from disease.

A: As you probably know if you have been reading BIRD TALK, there can be many causes of feather loss (technically called alopecia) in our parrot companions. While I won't try to diagnose your bird's condition – and I recommend you take your newest pet bird to an avian veterinarian for a workup and diagnosis – here's some information about what I believe might be going on because you and others can learn from this.

First, since you have all three birds in one cage, I presume you did not quarantine your newest cockatiel prior to introducing him to your two other cockatiels.

Many people seem to believe that it cannot happen to them. It can happen to you, and it does happen to bird owners every day. What I am talking about is bringing a disease to your birds by not having a new bird examined and tested by an avian vet and then quarantine the new bird in a separate air space for at least six weeks prior to housing it with your established birds.

The Case For Quarantining

Unfortunately, birds are great at hiding illnesses. It is easy to bring Giardia, psittacosis (*Chlamydia*) or bacterial infections, for example, home to your other birds – even if your new bird appears healthy. If you have a bird examined and tested prior to introducing it to your other parrot family members, and then quarantine it for a period of time, any infections diagnosed can be treated during that time.

If no illness is diagnosed (and it can be difficult to diagnose many avian illnesses), a bird in a new environment, exposed to new people and different routines, is more likely to break with illness during quarantine. If that happens, the bird can then be diagnosed and treated, without risking infecting your other birds.

Giardia

That said, I suspect that your new cockatiel with the feather loss under the wings might be suffering from giardiasis. Giardia is a one-celled protozoal parasite that inhabits the first part of the small intestines and can cause weight loss, loose stool, enteritis and interestingly, itchiness and feather picking.

While we don't know for sure why this organism causes itching and feather picking, we do know that the majority of cockatiels with Giardia often demonstrate feather loss under the wings, and along the thighs, and sometimes the lower abdomen, shoulders and back.

Some birds with Giardia are never seen pulling out feathers, yet, there is noticeable feather loss from the thighs and/or the underside of the wings. Sometimes, it takes multiple tests to accurately diagnose giardiasis. It may require fixing feces in a special preservative for staining at a specialty lab in order to correctly diagnose it.

The best treatment is with a drug called ronidazole that is available from compounding pharmacists or as an imported medication from certain retailers. In your case, if Giardia is diagnosed or strongly suspected, your veterinarian may recommend treatment with ronidazole (it works much better than the traditional medication, metronidazole), and converting your birds to a water bottle to prevent re-infestation. Since all three birds are housed together, your avian vet will probably recommend treating all of your pet birds, since this is a contagious disease.

Quarantine all new birds prior to introducing them to your family pets. Even if you bought a bird from me, I would recommend you quarantine it for the safety of your other pet birds.

If your cockatiels do have giardiasis, you got off easy, as some diseases can be progressive and fatal, with no known cure. That can be a sobering thought. If you love your pet birds, you will protect them as best you can, and taking steps to quarantine all new birds is one way to do that!