

Acute Respiratory Distress In Pet Birds

How to handle this common air-related emergency among pet birds.

By Rebecca Sweat

Parrots have sensitive lungs, so clean air is important.

You're boiling eggs in a saucepan on the stove when the phone rings. It's a friend you haven't heard from in a while and she wants to talk. You start chatting and lose all track of time, completely forgetting about your pan on the stove. Twenty minutes into the conversation you smell smoke and run into the kitchen. The water has long evaporated, the eggs have exploded into black bits all over your range, and the nonstick coating on the pan has melted. But far worse, your cockatiel — which you keep in a cage next to your kitchen table — has dropped dead at the bottom of his cage. Sound like a far-fetched story? Unfortunately, it's not.

Cases such as this — referred to as "acute respiratory distress" among veterinarians — are an all too common emergency among pet birds. Often it's a result of them inhaling an airborne toxin, such as the fumes that are emitted from overheated nonstick cookware or self-cleaning ovens. Birds can also get into trouble when they inhale carbon monoxide emissions from faulty heaters and furnaces, harsh household cleansers, insecticides, aerosolized deodorant or hair spray, or paint fumes.

Sadly, a lot of pet owners do not figure out that a smell is bothering their bird until it is too late. "You don't always get a lot of warning that something is wrong," said Lisa Murphy, VMD, of the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center. "Sometimes, you just find the bird dead or very close to death at the bottom of its cage."

Symptoms can come on suddenly, Murphy said, and could include difficult or open-mouth breathing, weakness or inability to stay on the perch, quiet or lethargic behavior, tail bobbing, and restless or disoriented behavior. Sometimes the bird's feet and beak will start to look a little gray or bluish.

What should you do if you notice any of these signs? "The best thing you can do is get the bird away from the source of the problem and into fresh air immediately," advised Illinois veterinarian, Richard Nye, DVM. From his experience, that is often all it takes clear out the toxins and get the bird breathing normally again.

On the other hand if you've moved your bird into fresh air and a few minutes go by and he's still having trouble breathing, you should rush him to the emergency veterinary clinic. There, your bird may be treated with oxygen therapy or a diuretic to try to get fluid out of its lungs, bronchial-dilators to try to open up his airways so that the veterinarian can get some oxygen in there, or your bird may need anti-inflammatory drugs or antibiotics.

Of course, you may have burned dinner and your bird's not exhibiting any unusual signs. Even then, Murphy said, "it would probably still be a good idea to get that bird out of that area and into some fresh air until that contaminated area has had a chance to air out and no longer has that smell to it."

Bad fumes are not something to just ignore. "Acute respiratory distress is a very serious condition in birds, and many birds suffering from it end up dying — sometimes in a matter of minutes," Nye said. However, he added, "if you take quick action, you greatly increase your bird's chances of survival."

Proactive bird care starts at home. Follow kitchen safety rules, only have bird-safe cookware and keep your pet bird's air clean free of toxins.