

My Bird Has Bad Breath

A bird with bad breath is a sign of a bacteria infection, and the bird needs to see an avian veterinarian.

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Courtesy of Elizabeth Smith, California
Foul smelling breath is uncommon in birds.

Q: My Fischer's lovebird is healthy other than the fact that his breath smells awful. The vet did a Gram's stain and other tests, but came up with nothing. He suggested I feed the bird a red wine-and-vinegar solution for a month, but this didn't work. Is my bird's bad breath common, and will it go away?

A: Foul breath is very uncommon in birds. Birds with bad breath suffer from an abnormality somewhere in the gastrointestinal tract, respiratory tract or perhaps with the oropharynx.

In regards to nutrition, vitamin-A deficiency might predispose a bird to certain infections, including those caused by bacteria or yeast, such as *Candida* sp. These infections could possibly cause halitosis. Feeding rancid seed or spoiled food items could also possibly result in bad breath.

Bacteria normally found in the gastrointestinal tract, especially the colon of mammals (including humans), are called coliform bacteria. A characteristic fecal-type odor is associated with some coliform bacteria and other bacterial inhabitants of the colon of mammals. If a bird becomes infected with one type of these bacteria, it is possible that its breath (if the bacteria colonize the mouth, crop or proventriculus) or its droppings (if the bacteria set up shop in the lower gastrointestinal tract) can develop an odor resembling feces.

Sources Of Bacteria

How could this happen? Well, many fruits and vegetables are grown using manure as fertilizer, and this can be a potent source of bacteria. Soil may also contain coliform bacteria if contaminated with mammalian fecal material. If fruit or vegetables are not washed thoroughly prior to offering them to birds, they may introduce bacteria into a bird upon ingestion.

If a bird is in the bathroom to receive the benefit of increased humidity from a running shower, for example, it is possible for coliform bacteria to become aerosolized when the toilet is flushed, thus introducing that bacteria to a bird. All owners should wash their hands after using the bathroom, prior to handling their pet bird, to prevent the spread of coliform bacteria.

An organism called Avian Gastric Yeast (AGY), formerly called megabacteria, is found in the junction of the proventriculus and ventriculus and may also be found elsewhere in the gastrointestinal tract of affected birds. It can be difficult to diagnose in a live bird, however. This organism can be also responsible for changes in the odor of a bird's breath.

If your lovebird has an ulcer in the crop, proventriculus or ventriculus that was contaminated by coliform or other bacteria, this could impart a bad or "fecal" type of odor to your bird's breath.

Other Causes Of Bad Breath

Other gastrointestinal problems, possibly involving coliform bacteria, could also cause bad breath. For example, Proventricular Dilatation Disease, PDD, can cause halitosis. An unusual type of organism, called a spirochete, has been uncovered in lovebirds, in particular. While not much is known about this organism and its relation to disease processes in birds, I suppose a spirochete, infecting the gastrointestinal tract, could be responsible for halitosis.

Tumors, either benign or malignant, involving the gastrointestinal tract can result in bad breath, too, especially if they erode or cause ulceration into the GI tract. Tumors might be diagnosed through a combination of blood work, radiographs (X-rays), ultrasound or endoscopy.

Protozoal infections can also be involved with the GI tract. Trichomoniasis is a protozoal infection that may affect the oropharynx. This can be a difficult organism to diagnose.

Giardia is another one-celled protozoal organism that can cause GI problems. Some protozoal infections can be treated most effectively with ronidazole. While protozoal problems are not usually associated with halitosis, theoretically, it could happen.

Treatment Options

I have never heard of using red wine to treat any bird diseases. Vinegar has been touted both by holistic and mainstream avian veterinarians to help treat many diseases, mostly of the GI tract, and by helping acidify the contents of the proventriculus and ventriculus.

I suggest a thorough physical examination and work-up for your lovebird. This should include a complete blood count (CBC); plasma chemistry panel; Gram's stains of the choana, crop and cloaca; any appropriate bacterial and fungal cultures; appropriate serological tests based on what the history, physical exam and other tests reveal; whole-body radiographs and, perhaps, endoscopy.

If your avian veterinarian would like some help with your case, suggest a consultation with a board-certified avian specialist, as most large veterinary labs offer consultations as a complimentary service to assist their avian veterinary clients. If your vet is not comfortable performing some of the more sophisticated tests, ask him/her for a referral to a large referral center or avian specialist.

In humans and pet mammals, bad breath is usually a sign of dental disease or problems with the gums, almost always involving a bacterial infection. Since birds don't have teeth (other than the single egg tooth that is not composed of the same structures as a mammalian tooth), we can rule out dental and periodontal disease as a cause of halitosis.

But, certainly, infections involving the lungs or gastrointestinal tract can impact a bird's breath.

Since this seems to be a new development, I am concerned that there could be a medical cause underlying this condition. Have your bird thoroughly checked out, and work with your avian vet to uncover the cause, and affect a cure.