

Signs of Illness

Recognize the signs of bird illness and when to see a vet

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To protect the health of our avian friends, we must recognize and address the signs of illness as early as possible in the disease process. Early recognition of disease will allow for more successful treatment and a quicker recovery. In order to recognize disease (abnormal), we need to understand and recognize health (normal).

Normal Disposition

Attitude is one of the first indicators of health. A healthy bird is alert to its surroundings; it is aware of all that is going on around it. A healthy bird spends a large part of its day in activity and play. It will maintain an upright posture the majority of the time. It bears weight equally on both legs. A healthy bird has an excellent sense of balance and is steady on its feet. Wings are held close to the body and at equal heights. A healthy bird is able to quickly recover from stressful events once the stressor has been removed. It will return to a normal attitude quickly.

Signs of Illness

A bird that sits on the bottom of its cage, appears to have balance difficulties or always sits with its tucked head may be ill or injured. A sick bird may also show increased aggression toward cage mates.

Owners need to be aware of the normal amounts of food and water their birds consume. Decreases in the amounts consumed or an apparent lack of appetite may signal disease. Some ill birds will sit at the bowl and appear to eat while actually dropping more than they consume. Regular weight checks allow the owner to monitor for disease. Weigh your bird at the same time every day, such as early in the morning just after the bird wakes up and before you feed it. A weight loss of greater than 10 percent of normal body weight is an indication of illness and this bird should be examined by a veterinarian.

Respiratory patterns are another clue to health status. A bird that is calm and at rest has smooth and easy respirations. There is no evidence of tail bobbing (an up and down motion of the tail in rhythm with the respirations.) There is no prolonged open mouth breathing after play or stress. Respiratory rates quickly return to normal after rough play or stress.

A healthy bird's eyes are bright and clear. There is no evidence of redness or discharge. The tissue around the eyes shows no evidence of swelling, and there is no swelling of the eyelids or conjunctival tissues. In birds with bare facial patches, the skin is of normal color for the species. Color changes or bruising deserve a closer examination.

A bird's ears are located just under the feathers on either side of the head. Normal ears are free of any redness, discharge or blockage. There is no swelling of the tissues surrounding the ears.

The oral cavity and the beak can provide further clues to health. The beak is of normal shape and length for the species. Rapid beak overgrowth can be associated with metabolic disease or malnutrition. The mucous membranes of the oral cavity are normally a light pink in color. Consider any discharge or masses in this area abnormal.

The small conical papillae lining the choanal slit are normally sharp and pointed. Blunting of these structures may be an indication of a vitamin-A deficiency,

The keel of a bird should be well-muscled, but still palpable. Lack of muscle definition in the area of the keel indicates a bird that is underweight. If the keel is difficult to palpate, the bird is overweight and attention needs to be paid to diet and exercise. The keel of young, fledgling birds is more prominent than that of adults.

Skin

The skin is one of the largest organs in the body. Normal skin is free of redness, discharge or any evidence of swellings. Scales on the feet and legs will normally lie smooth and flat. Skin under the wings is intact and free of lesions. Many species of birds have bare facial patches. Be aware of this area's normal pigmentation in order to detect changes. A change in skin pigmentation merits a veterinary examination. In some species, such as the Vasa parrot, the skin pigmentation changes with breeding season.

Feathers

The feathers should be smooth with a bright and colorful appearance. Tattered or torn feathers may indicate a delayed molt or feather-chewing behaviors. Juvenile birds sometimes abuse their feathers while playing, but this usually corrects itself with the first molt as they learn how to take better care of their feathers. It is never normal for skin to be showing in areas that are normally covered with feathers.

Feathers that are abnormal in shape may indicate a viral infection such as psittacine beak and feather disease. A bird that is pulling feathers just over one small area of the body may be demonstrating a pain response due to a disease issue underlying that area. Skin infections and metabolic disease problems may lead to feather damaging behaviors as well. Feather problems are a possible indication that disease or illnesses are present so visit your veterinarian for a full exam.

Vent Region

A healthy bird's vent region is clean and free of fecal material or growths. Matting of the feathers in this area is a possible indication of diarrhea. Discharge in the vent region is an indication of infection or trauma. Bleeding or swelling of the vent region may indicate the presence of papillomas or it may be due to trauma or infection.

Changes In Droppings

The droppings of birds are composed of three parts: the solid, colored fecal portion (color varies according to diet); a white crystalline urate portion; and a clear liquid urine portion.

Absence of feces in the droppings can indicate a lack of food intake or intestinal obstruction. Black-colored feces can signal that there is bleeding high up in the digestive tract. A liquid appearance or a complete lack of form to the feces indicates diarrhea. Color changes to the urate portion of the feces may indicate a metabolic disease (i.e. liver disease) or the presence of viral or bacterial infections.

Large increases in the amount of urine in the droppings are an indication that a bird has increased its amount of water intake, which is a possible symptom of diabetes or other disease.

Fresh blood in the droppings is never normal and merits a veterinary examination. Any changes in the droppings that are not explained by diet demand immediate veterinary attention.