

Nonstick Pans, Self-Cleaning Ovens & Your Pet Bird

Keep your pet bird safe from deadly items in your kitchen.

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Nonstick cookware can be deadly to your bird, so use a safe alternative, like stainless steel pans.

It's a jungle in here! Sharing your home with a pet bird is more than a hobby. It's a lifestyle. Because our birds have such sensitive respiratory systems, we must be extremely careful in our product choices. Each month, I field questions about nonstick cookware and appliances, safe building materials and other indoor environment issues.

People who share their homes with pet birds are often frustrated in their quest for bird-safe appliances and cookware. Few retail salespeople are educated about the dangers posed by nonstick surfaces and are not often qualified to answer our questions. Likewise, manufacturers' customer service representatives are not always informed enough to answer technical questions, and; even when we get to the technical department, we may not get definitive answers.

Nonstick coatings contain polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE), a polymer that begins to deteriorate when overheated. The resulting fumes (gas and minute particulate matter) may kill pet birds quickly. Affected humans report flu-like symptoms.

Manufacturers disagree about the temperature levels that nonstick surfaces must reach to emit harmful fumes. Some place it at 560 degrees Fahrenheit, and others indicate that it is higher or lower. Research has shown that products actually begin releasing such fumes at the beginning of the heating process, and some people have reported that pet birds have died when nonstick products have been heated to temperatures below 560 degrees Fahrenheit. A few manufacturers, like Corning Revere, print warnings in product instructions against using non-stick cookware around pet birds, but you must read the fine print to find it.

Instead of nonstick cookware, try: Stainless steelCopper-clad stainless steelCopperCorningware, the classic, white oven-to-table wareGlassAluminumCast iron

Birds & Stoves

A stove, heated the first few times, may emit fumes from components treated with chemicals intended to inhibit rust and deterioration. A self-cleaning oven may also give off toxic fumes, perhaps from parts treated with nonstick coatings. Emissions are often strongest when appliances and cookware are new. (This does not mean that older nonstick products are safe for use around birds.) When moving into a new home, run the stove/oven at a high heat level for several hours a few days prior to moving, before you and the birds are in residence. Open the windows for ventilation during this process. Use a range hood that vents to outdoors, as opposed to ventless hoods that blow pollutants back into the room. Many avian deaths occur around the winter holidays, as people run the self-cleaning oven cycles just after cooking big, festive dinners. The weather is cold and windows are closed, so smoke and toxic fumes are trapped indoors. Wait until the weather is mild enough to open all the windows before you use the self-cleaning feature and, if possible, relocate your birds during the process.

It's difficult to say which stove would be safe, as models change frequently. When considering the purchase of a new stove or appliance, contact the manufacturer prior to buying. You'll usually find an address or telephone number on the label or packaging. Ask if the products include polymers containing PTFE or other potentially harmful chemicals. If you are told they do not, insist on written assurance of that fact. Of course companies cannot guarantee that any product is absolutely safe for use around birds because most products are not routinely tested on birds, and manufacturers do not have control over how you use the product.

You are your bird's best defense against household toxins!Smoke from burned-on food, grease and other debris inside your oven can also be deadly to your birds. Do not house your birds in the kitchen.Locate birds in an area where fumes and smoke will not drift into their airspace.Do not rely on air filters or purifiers to remove toxic fumes form the air.Use a range hood that vents to outdoors, or use a window fan blowing air out of the kitchen.Open windows for a few minutes, at least once a day, even in chilly weather.Never leave cooking unattended.

Instead of using chemicals or self-cleaning oven cycles, wipe oven surfaces with a solution of white vinegar and water after each use. Use a steel wool pad to rub off stubborn dirt. Some readers report success using a hand-held steam-cleaning machine to clean their ovens.

What does "nontoxic" mean?

When a product is described as nontoxic usually means that it is not harmful, in a significant way, to humans or to the environment. If it does not contribute to outdoor smog levels, it may be considered safe, but when concentrated in an indoor atmosphere, the same chemical may be harmful to your birds. Read directions and ingredient labels on products carefully. Some nontoxic products are actually lethal to fish or invertebrates. Others may cause minor skin, eye or lung irritations in humans, but are still touted as "non-toxic when used as directed."