

Common Cockatoo Health Concerns

Find out what health issues cockatoos are prone to

By Rebecca Sweat

Cockatoos can come down with most of the same diseases as other parrots, but they are prone to certain illnesses.

While cockatoos can come down with most of the same diseases as any other type of bird, they are prone to certain illnesses. Here's what veterinarians generally say are the most common health problems in cockatoos:

Psittacine beak and feather disease (Pbfd)

Caused by a circovirus that attacks the cells of the immune system and cells that produce the beak and feathers.

"Essentially, it results in poor feather growth and feathers that don't replace themselves when they fall out," said Dr. Alex Rosenwax, an avian veterinarian in Sydney, Australia. In addition, the beak may become fragile and not repair itself. Because the virus targets the center of the developing bird's immune system, infected birds often become immunocompromised and die of secondary infections — either bacterial, viral or fungal. Currently, there is no known cure for Pbfd. Infected birds usually die a few months to a year after showing clinical symptoms of the disease.

Obesity

Cockatoos, particularly the rose-breasted (Galah) cockatoo, seem to be genetically pre-disposed to obesity. High-fat diets and lack of activity can further exacerbate the problem. An overweight cockatoo may have difficulty breathing, joint and bone stress, as well as a greater probability of diabetes, pancreatitis, liver disease, atherosclerosis and heart disease. Feeding a pelleted-base diet and providing your cockatoo with daily, rigorous exercise are the best preventative steps you can take.

Fatty Liver Disease

One of the most common health problem associated with obesity is fatty liver disease (hepatic lipidosis). In birds, the liver stores energy in the form of fat. As an increasing amount of fat is stored there, liver cells are lost. "The bird's liver will literally replace itself with fat," noted Florida veterinarian, Dr. Don Harris. "A point may be reached at which there is not enough functional liver left to support life, and the bird will die."

Lipomas

Another problem associated with obesity is lipomas — benign fatty tumors that usually appear on the lower part of a bird's abdomen. Lipomas are seen in all cockatoos, but especially the rose-breasted and sulphur-crested species. They are not normally fatal but can cause the bird discomfort if they become ulcerated or grow too large. Treatment may involve surgical removal or dietary restrictions to reduce the tumor's size.

Bumblefoot

This health problem is characterized by lameness, swelling of the bird's foot and lesions that discharge a milky-colored ooze. The cause is usually a combination of dirty perches, unsanitary cages and poor nutrition. A diet high in a natural source of vitamin A can help lesions heal quicker as well as help keep a bird's immune system stronger. If left untreated, bumblefoot can result in the loss of the bird's toes or feet.

Feather Picking and Self-mutilation

Anytime a bird shows signs of either disorder, it should be taken to a veterinarian for a thorough examination. Often, there's another health problem that's the root cause, such as aspergillosis, worms or lice infestations, Pbfd or a bacterial infection. Once the physical causes are ruled out, then behavioral issues can be addressed.

Feather picking not attributed to a medical cause is an obsessive-compulsive disorder in which a bird picks at, plucks out or chews on its feathers. Self-mutilation is a disorder where a bird chews on its own flesh, typically on the breast area or toes. As the bird chews on itself, nerve and tissue damage can result, causing increased discomfort, which may cause the bird to chew even more. Both disorders can be caused by household stress, boredom or sexual frustration. "The cockatoo may have inadequate space in which to exercise and fly, or needs companionship and entertainment," said Dr. Alex Rosenwax, BVSc, MACVSc, an avian veterinarian in Sydney, Australia.