

## What To Expect From Your Vet ...

### **And what your vet expects from you.**

*By Laurie Hess, DVM, Diplomate ABVP (Avian Practice)*

Originally published in BirdsUSA January, 2007

One of the most frustrating situations I encounter as an avian veterinarian is seeing a bird suffer from a preventable disease. This is especially frustrating if the bird is young or just recently acquired. Too often, bird owners invest a great deal of time and money purchasing a new bird but then never take it to the vet to ensure its health.

An experienced avian veterinarian will perform a thorough search of your bird and should make you feel comfortable.

Birds, perhaps even more so than cats and dogs, need regular veterinary examinations. Unlike cats and dogs, which are petted and handled on a regular basis, many birds are not directly handled by their owners, and they often conceal disease until they are very sick. An experienced veterinarian should teach owners preventative health care, starting at the very first veterinary visit.

#### Diet

One topic an experienced avian vet should spend a significant amount of time discussing is diet. The vet and owner should talk about not only what the bird eats and but how often it is fed.

In general, I recommend feeding most healthy parrots one of the commercially available pellet diets along with a small amount of vegetables and fruits, particularly the orange. Red and yellow produce, which is high in beta-carotene, the precursor to vitamin A, is essential to a bird's diet.

If the bird is eating predominantly seed, the vet may want to start vitamin supplementation directly on moist table food, to which the vitamins will stick (rather than in the water, where vitamins can degrade, or on the seeds, from which birds remove the outer hull).

Vitamin supplementation might be discontinued once the bird begins consuming large amounts of pellets. If a bird is to be gradually transitioned to eating pellets, the vet should spend some time advising the owner how to accomplish this.

After discussing diet and environment, the vet should observe the bird in its cage before handling it, noting its activity level, body language and droppings. By looking at the bird in the cage, the vet might be able to tell whether it is eating (from the presence of chewed up food and droppings), how the bird feels (whether it is active and vocalizing or fluffed up and quiet), and how well socialized it is (if it screams and attacks when the cage is approached or if it vocalizes calmly and appears curious).

#### Handling

The vet should confidently attempt to pick up the bird for examination. Some vets prefer to have the bird come out of the cage first and "step up" on to a hand, before they gently try to restrain it, while other vets try to "catch" the bird in its cage. To a great extent, the method of restraint a vet employs depends on the bird's temperament and degree to which it is used to being handled.

Some birds are handled often by their owners and are not bothered by being gently wrapped in a towel. Other birds are never handled and become aggressive and upset by toweling. In either case, an experienced avian vet should approach the bird slowly and patiently, speaking gently and quietly.

Sometimes, owners can help the vet in trying to calm their pet as it is wrapped slowly in a towel. Other times, birds are more upset when their owners are involved in restraint and, as such, the vet might ask the owner to step away from the bird as the vet towels it. If this is the case, the owner should not be offended. Most of the time, unless a bird is trained to accept physical examination, some degree of gentle restraint is necessary for the vet to fully examine the bird and to ensure that neither the bird nor the vet gets hurt in the process.

#### The Exam

During physical examination, a vet comfortable with birds should examine the bird systematically, just as he or she might

examine a dog or cat. Many vets are trained to examine all animals according to a body systems approach. This involves looking step by step at each body system, including: eyes, ears, nose, throat heart, lungs, air sacs chest/abdomen muscles/skeletal system urinary/genital tract skin/feathers neurological system

Other vets begin at the bird's head and work their way down the bird, as they look at each body part. Regardless of what method is used, an experienced avian vet typically does the following: Weigh the bird in a small scale, with the bird sitting in a basket on the scale or on a perch. Measurement is often made in grams and should be recorded in the bird's medical record Look at the eyes, nose, mouth and ears for discharge, swelling, discoloration Feel the crop (out pouching of the esophagus located under the skin in the neck area) for lumps, fullness Feel the pectoral muscles and keel (breast bone) to assess its weight Listen to the heart and respiratory tract with a stethoscope to assess heart rate, rhythm, and breathing Palpate the abdomen, below the keel, for distension, fullness Extend and feel both wings to ensure they are symmetrical Check the vent (opening from which fecal droppings come) for growths, swelling, bleeding, retained fecal material Examine the uropygial (green) gland at the base of the tail for symmetry, abnormal discharge, swelling Inspect the skin/feathers for color changes, loss, evidence of barbering (chewing) or other damage (from parasites, fungal or bacterial infection, trauma) Look at and feel both feet to ensure that all toes are working properly and that the skin on the feet and legs looks normal

The vet will also assess neurological function by determining: Do both feet grasp and pull away with equal strength? Do both wings extend and fold up symmetrically? Is the blink response normal in both eyes, and do both pupils respond to light? Does the vent sphincter (the muscles and nerves that open and close the vent) work properly?

If the vet performs each of these steps, the bird will have received a complete physical examination.

#### Diagnostic Tests

After finishing the physical examination, an experienced avian vet will likely recommend performing a series of diagnostic tests to help assure the bird's health. These might include: Complete blood count (CBC) to measure red and white blood cells Chemistry profile to check liver, kidney, and muscle enzymes; total protein and globulin levels; electrolytes (such as sodium and potassium) levels; blood sugar; calcium and phosphorus concentrations; and sometimes, cholesterol level Protein electrophoresis to look at antibody concentrations in the blood as a general screening test for infection or inflammation Psittacosis (or Chlamydiophila) testing to check for parrot fever, a disease commonly carried by parrots, often without clinical signs. There are many tests for this disease, and none are 100 percent perfect in diagnosing this condition. Tests for specific infections, such as psittacine beak and feather disease virus, polyoma virus, etc. Which of these tests a vet recommends depends on what species the bird is, whether the bird has signs of illness, the bird's age, and other bird-specific factors. Bile acid testing to assess liver function Sexing test performed on DNA in the blood. It is useful to know the bird's gender so that owners can be educated in signs of egg laying/binding if the bird is female. Fecal examination under the microscope to look for parasites, yeast, or abnormal bacteria. Often, fecal examination is performed right in the vet's office.

An experienced avian veterinarian should explain to the owner why he or she is recommending each of the tests and why these tests are valuable. Blood testing generally should be performed even in healthy new birds so that the vet has baseline results for an individual bird should it get sick in the future.

#### Blood Draw

An experienced avian vet is comfortable drawing blood, even from small birds, and will be able to calculate the amount of blood he or she can safely take from the bird's body weight. Many avian vets draw blood from the bird in the examination room in front of the owner. The most common site from which blood is drawn is from the jugular vein, on the right side of the neck.

The bird is commonly restrained in a towel and held so that it is lying on its side. Then, either the vet alone or the vet and an assistant grasp the bird's head, locate the vein by putting alcohol on the neck, and then gently draw a small amount of blood into a syringe.

After taking blood, the vet puts gentle pressure on the neck for a minute or two to ensure there is no further bleeding before releasing the bird. Other than to check a red blood cell count or a blood sugar level, or if the bird is too ill to be restrained for blood sampling from the neck, taking blood from a toenail clip is not recommended, because any debris on a toenail can interfere with blood test results.

Once the vet is assured that the bird has recovered safely from the blood draw and the physical examination is complete, the veterinarian should return the pet to its owner and offer to help the owner get the bird back into its travel carrier. The vet should ask the owner whether he or she has any questions and should offer the owner some idea as to when test results will be back.

An experienced avian vet will then follow up with the owner on the telephone, after the visit, to report test results and to see how the bird is doing at home.

#### A Lifelong Commitment

Choosing a bird, often a lifelong companion, can be a complicated process. Choosing a vet for that lifelong companion should not be a complicated process. An experienced avian vet should be patient, confident, and knowledgeable. An owner should feel at ease with the vet, as the vet-owner-patient relationship is essential to ensuring a bird's health. A solid vet-owner-patient relationship begins at the first veterinary visit, and I hope that this thumbnail sketch of the first trip to the avian vet will give bird owners an idea of what to expect.