

Protect Your Bird From PBFD

Helpful tips to protect your bird from psittacine beak and feather disease

By Crystal Apilado

Protect your birds from exposure to the PBFD virus with precautionary steps. Courtesy Kristine Obenour, Florida

Although psittacine beak and feather disease (PBFD), also known as the psittacine circovirus, is generally considered to affect young birds, older birds are also at risk. In 2005, BIRD TALK columnist Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP, Avian Practice, wrote the article, "PBFD Review 2005," on what this bird disease is and what currently could be done about it. Here is a look at how you can prevent your flock from contracting PBFD and questions to ask when you are looking to bring a new bird home.

What Birds Are Most At Risk

PBFD is generally a disease of young birds. However, it has been diagnosed in birds up to 20 years of age, according to North Carolina avian veterinarian Greg Burkett, DVM, Dipl. ABVP. "Many species of psittacines have been shown to be susceptible to the virus, including all of the cockatoos, African greys, lovebirds, Poicephalus, macaws, Amazons and many others," Burkett said. Arizona avian veterinarian, Jill Patt, DVM, noted that the disease is not limited to just these specific species and all bird owners should take caution.

Protect Your Birds

Protect your bird by preventing exposure to PBFD. This takes precautionary steps in all instances that your bird will be exposed to other birds.

Have all of your birds tested for PBFD

Get all new birds tested and put them through a quarantine period

Avoid bringing your bird into environments with a variety of species that may not have been tested.

Quarantining new birds from birds already in your flock is an important step. Infected birds shed disease during stressful times and, even in the best conditions, coming to a new home can be stressful for the first few months, Patt said.

"PBFD virus remains infectious for a long time in the environment. The virus is shed in large quantities in feather dust and can easily be transmitted to other birds from clothing, hair, hands, etc," Burkett said. "Positive birds should not be exposed to other birds, ever."

Questions To Ask

Know what questions to ask to prevent an infected bird from entering your home. "The No. 1 question is: Does the breeder test their flock and their babies for PBFD?" Burkett said. "If not, find a different breeder."

Birds can be infected and not show signs of the virus for years. Kitty Remington, DVM, a Florida avian veterinarian, stressed the importance of knowing a breeder or pet shop personnel and asking about PBFD testing. "Testing is the best method of assurance that the birds are OK," she said.

When choosing a bird breeder, Patt recommends:

Choose a breeder dedicated to that individual group of birds who doesn't mix birds from different continents.

Choose a breeder who provides regular preventative care, including veterinary exams, a healthy diet and a good environment.

Do your homework on the breeder to find out how birds are brought in to the facility and how their flock is managed.

Ensure that all birds come with a healthy pet clause and a written health guarantee.

Signs To Look For

One of the first noticeable signs is necrotic, abnormally formed feathers, Burkett said. Clinical signs also vary with the age of the bird. "Birds that are under 2 months of age show signs of septicemia, rapid weight loss, pneumonia, enteritis and death. Death typically occurs before feather lesions appear."

Observing a new bird during the quarantine period is a good time to look for any signs of PBFD. Signs to look for include: a decrease in appetite, decreased interaction, depression or lethargy, decreased perching behavior or a fluffed

appearance. "Specific to PBFD, owners should look for abnormal feather loss separate from a normal molting (which should never leave bald spots,)" Patt said. "And also abnormal or irregular growth of new feathers."

Bird owners should be concerned with feather abnormalities and feather disorders, Remington said. "The virus can suppress the immune system, and mild illness may be the only sign." She said. "I have also seen birds with abnormal feather colors. Burkett noted that other observable signs in feathers include retention of feather sheaths, blood in the pulp cavity of the feather, feather shaft fractures, clubbed and curled feathers, and stress bars in the feather vanes.