

Cancer In Birds

Genetics in bird species play a big role in likelihood of cancer.

By Angela Pham

Xrays of your bird can reveal areas that may be cancerous.

A year and a half ago, a 20-year-old cockatiel in Metairie, Louisiana, had a tumor of the preening glands that spanned 360 degrees around its tail. After months of weekly chemotherapy treatments, however, the bird has made a 180-degree transformation.

"We have shrunk that tumor and kept it shrunk down to a green-pea-sized tumor through these weekly injections," said Gregory Rich, DVM, an avian and exotic veterinarian at the West Esplanade Veterinary Clinic.

Such cancer-treatment success stories are not rare in the avian world; nor are the incidences of cancer. With a wide variety of bird species prone to a vast number of cancers, the causes and treatment of cancer are equally diverse.

Like in humans, Jeffrey Jenkins, DVM, of the Avian and Exotic Animal Hospital, said that squamous cell carcinoma is a common cancer among birds. Tumors in the skin and the preen glands are especially common among older cockatiels, typically occurring in their late teens and mid-to-late 20s, he said.

In budgies, a virus is suspected to cause kidney, pituitary gland and testicular tumors in birds under 5 years of age, although most cancers tend to affect older-aged birds, Jenkins said.

"They say cancer knows no age, but no question: It has a preference. It likes older ages," he said.

Internal Cancers

Rich said that internal cancers are most common with cockatiels and larger bird species, such as ovarian, kidney and liver cancer. With budgies and finches, bone and skin tumors are equally as prevalent in terms of number of cases, he said.

The variety of tumors that can occur in bird species is something of a laundry list. Laurie Hess, DVM, an avian and exotic species veterinarian in New York, said that the number of possible kinds of tumors affecting birds is nearly endless.

"They get melanomas, lymphomas, xanthoma, fibro sarcomas, ovarian and oviduct tumors," she said. Birds are also prone to melanomas on their beaks. Smaller bird species like parakeets and budgies can be more apt to get kidney and ovarian tumors, which can result in one-sided lameness because of swelling of the nerves from the organs.

"Birds will come in for lameness, but it's not the problem; the tumor is the problem," Hess said.

Reproductive tumors like ovarian and oviduct tumors can be treated by spaying the bird and removing the uterus, but Hess warns that it is a complicated and life-threatening surgery. Because of the heavy blood loss, she said it's easier to perform the procedure in larger-sized birds.

"Cancer has always been out there and is always a huge risk with exotics, more so than cats or dogs because of the huge blood loss," she said.

Treatment

Treatment of cancers in birds can range from amputation to complicated chemotherapy. With cancer in the beak or in the throat, Jenkins said freezing of the tumor can be an option, and they can also be treated with radiation therapy. Carcinomas in the legs and wings can be treated with amputation, though the loss of limbs is not necessary if the cancer is caught early, he said.

Rich said that bone tumors in birds are generally responsive to surgery, but the success of tumor treatment is dependent on the location of the tumor and the patient's proximity to a veterinary school. Certain tumor types have injectable protocols available at veterinary schools, he said, but overall, taking the tumor out rather than treating it is a more likely option.

"In avian species, removal is more common than chemotherapy because of the cost and location of tumors," Rich said. "Removing growths is probably more common in avian species than any other species."

Aside from the age factor, Rich said that, unfortunately, in birds, parakeets, budgies and cockatiels are more prone to cancer than other bird species.

Causes of Avian Cancer

Rich said that not all breeders follow family lines to see which have more cancer so that those are taken out of the breeding process.

Genetics inarguably play a role in the likelihood of cancer for all bird species. But Jenkins said that trauma can also be a factor. While xanthoma, a tumor-like condition that occurs in birds, is not technically classified as a cancer, its tendency to favor change is not unusual.

"Cancer likes change," Jenkins said. "We see it. Cockatiels who freak out and beat their wings against their cages oftentimes are the ones who turn up with xanthomas on their wingtips as older birds."

But overall physical condition of a bird is also a determining factor. Jenkins said that obese parrots are more susceptible to cancer, and those birds who eat nothing but seed mix and who receive little exercise are more prone to tumors. Skin cancers are also more likely with these overfed, under-exercised birds: Unhealthy skin with a layer of fat underneath is a recipe for trouble, he said.

Veterinarians' general recommendation? Keep your bird living long and cancer-free with regular checkups at the avian veterinarian to ensure that if a cancerous growth is found, it can be stopped before it turns into an emergency.

"Early detection is tantamount to help preventing later problems, done by a veterinarian's hands and eyes," Rich said.