

Pediatric Concerns

Take a quick look at these baby bird health challenges.

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Young birds are susceptible to a host of health problems. Here's a rundown of the most common challenges they face.

Malnutrition

Baby birds are sometimes fed an inadequate diet. A hand-fed bird that is not eating enough, or not receiving balanced nutrition, often loses condition. A bird weaned at a breeding facility may become stressed in its new surroundings and may stop eating on its own.

Oversupplementation

Most formulated bird diets are nutritionally complete and balanced, requiring no additional additives. Check with your avian vet before adding supplements to your bird's diet.

Aspiration Pneumonia

If a bird inhales food into its lungs, aspiration pneumonia may occur. If a crop is overfilled during the hand-feeding process and the food retro-pulses (backs up) into the oral cavity, it can be inhaled through the glottis (the opening into the windpipe). A baby bird with an overfilled crop could regurgitate and aspirate by merely lying down. A hand-fed bird might regurgitate the formula if the food is not the right consistency or temperature.

Treatment can be difficult, and the prognosis depends on how much food was inhaled. Quickly aspirating a large amount of food material can lead to sudden death. Aspiration of small amounts can produce chronic pneumonia. Antibiotics coupled with nebulization therapy have proved useful.

Crop Stasis

Primary causes of crop stasis, or sour crop, include the ingestion of foreign bodies in the crop. Baby birds do not know what is edible and what is not. They should be carefully watched when on substrate material, such as wood shavings or corn cob, to be certain they do not ingest it. They may also pick up foods like peanuts in the shell and swallow them whole. If you suspect that a foreign body was ingested by your bird, have your pet seen by a vet right away.

Dehydration also causes crop stasis. Dehydrated birds are less active, their gastrointestinal function is slow and water might be absorbed out of the food in the crop, leading to an impaction.

Crop Burn/Crop Fistula

Hand-feeding solution that is too hot will burn the lining of the crop. Initially after the feeding, the crop may develop a reddened area that will scab over in a few days. The problem is usually noticed by the bird owner at feeding time when the scab has loosened and food material runs out through the resultant fistula. Typically, surgical intervention is the only option, and if not done carefully, recurrence is likely.

Prevention is accomplished through the practice of good husbandry and proper hand-feeding techniques. After warming or preparing the hand-feeding formula, it should be well-mixed and the temperature checked before administration.

Infectious Diseases

A baby bird's immune system is still developing, and quite often, young birds have little natural immunity against infectious disease. Some chicks are raised in as sterile an environment as possible, with little exposure to normal flora that would be present if the chick were parent-raised. The transfer from the aviary to a new home can also expose a bird to different bacterial populations against which the bird has no defense. Immunity may also drop due to the stress of a new environment, making the bird more vulnerable to disease.

Young birds suffering from disease should have cultures and sensitivities performed to quickly determine the proper antibiotic therapy. Chlamydiosis (psittacosis) is always a consideration, and a newly purchased bird (or new bird of any age) should always be tested for chlamydiosis when taken to the vet for a health examination.

Viral disorders

Some viruses are especially problematic in young birds, such as psittacine beak and feather disease (PBFD) virus and polyomavirus. Before introducing new birds into the home and to other birds, have the birds screened by a veterinarian.

Mycotic (Fungal) Infections

Candida is frequently seen in baby birds, as either a primary condition (usually in cockatiels) or secondary. Most mild cases will respond to nystatin, and some breeders routinely add this medication to their hand-feeding formulas as a preventative. More severe cases of candidiasis require systemic antifungals.

Aspergillosis is caused by exposure to fungal spores in the environment. Baby birds are at a higher risk due to their developing immune system and the stresses of the hand-feeding process and weaning. Exposure to large amounts of fungal spores can cause an overwhelming case of aspergillosis in a neonate, resulting in rapid death, rather than the chronic form seen in low-grade, long-term exposure in older birds. Treatment is with systemic antifungals.

Orthopedic Problems

Splay, or spraddle, legs occur when there is deformity in the legs with deviation outward, usually related to the stifle (knee). Hip changes can also be seen.

Many potential causes for the condition exist, including: trauma, inadequate substrate in the nest or brooder (especially if kept on a hard, slippery surface), metabolic bone disease or calcium, phosphorus or vitamin D3 imbalances.

Tarsometarsus (hock) deviation can be seen when baby birds are kept in a container with a rounded bottom. Poor nutrition can lead to greenstick fractures, folding fractures, and other feet and leg deformities.

Correction of such conditions includes placing the bird in a bowl or deep cup padded with paper towels to prevent further slippage outward. Hobbles, and splinting or taping the legs to a sponge or through holes in a foam traction device have been tried with great success. These techniques have a much greater success rate if the condition is identified and treated while the bird is still early in development. Surgical intervention may be required in severe cases or in older birds that have nearly completed growth.

Constricted Toe/Annular Toe Deformity

This condition affects baby birds and results from constricting bands of tissue around one or two toes, initially leading to swelling and then necrosis with resultant loss of the toe(s). Macaws seem to be especially affected. Treatment is either surgical correction or amputation. The constricting bands are cut and removed, the swollen toe should be lanced and the serosanguineous fluid milked out. [Note: Only experienced bird breeders or avian vets should ever perform this. — Eds]

Bandaging the toe with a pressure-type wrap can aid in the prevention of refilling, and antibiotics may be required. Persistence is needed, and the toe should be frequently monitored. Unfortunately, by the time veterinary assistance is sought, the condition is usually so far advanced that amputation may be the only reasonable course of action.

Beak Abnormalities: Lateral Deviation of the maxilla (upper beak)

This condition is rare, and develops from hand-feeding. If the beak begins deviation from the cere, it could be due to an upper respiratory tract infection. Irregularities of the mandibular surface could also lead to deviation of the maxilla. Treatment is through physical therapy, grinding of the occlusal surfaces or, in severe cases, prostheses.

Mandibular prognathism (extended lower beak) or maxillary brachygnathism (undershot upper beak)

These conditions could be due to trauma or a developmental problem and may be potentiated by a calcium deficiency. Treatment is through digital manipulation or physical therapy before the beak is calcified. If the beak is calcified, acrylic prostheses are required.

