



Introduction to Bird Care

Melissa Magnuson, DVM • Alexandra Kilgore, DVM

Pet birds, including parrots, canaries, doves, and finches, have very specialized needs. Providing appropriate housing, nutrition, enrichment, grooming, and preventive healthcare is essential for long-term health. The information below offers general guidance to help you care for your bird safely and responsibly.

Housing and Environment

Your bird's cage should be designed specifically for birds. Cages intended for other animals may contain metals such as lead or zinc, which are highly toxic to birds.



The cage should be large enough for your bird to move freely both horizontally and vertically, structurally sound, free of rust, and appropriate for the size and strength of your bird's species.

Paper is the best cage liner. It is easy to change daily and allows you to monitor droppings for early signs of illness. Corn cob, walnut shell, and other scoopable substrates are not recommended, as they can grow mold when wet and pose a respiratory risk. Pine shavings should never be used.

Cage placement matters. Secure the cage so it cannot be tipped over, and avoid placing it near windows, doors, or vents where drafts and temperature changes occur.

Perching is a natural and necessary behavior. Provide a variety of perch sizes, shapes, and textures placed at different heights. Natural branches from reputable pet stores or untreated trees are excellent options. Terracotta perches and rope perches also make good choices. Sandpaper perches are not recommended, as they can irritate foot pads and may be chewed, exposing birds to glue and abrasive material.

Toys and Enrichment

Mental stimulation is essential for birds and directly impacts their emotional and physical health. Provide a variety of safe, sturdy, non-toxic toys appropriate for your bird's size.

Inspect toys regularly for loose or small parts that could be swallowed. Avoid toys containing lead or zinc and purchase from reputable sources.

Toys should be cleaned routinely. Most toys can be washed with hot water and mild soap and rinsed thoroughly to remove residue.

Cleaning and Sanitation

Cages should be cleaned at least once weekly. Use mild dish soap and warm water to remove droppings and food debris.

If disinfecting, use a solution of one capful of bleach per gallon of water. This must be done in a well-ventilated area and away from your bird. Rinse thoroughly and ensure the cage is completely dry before returning your bird to it.

Diet and Nutrition

Seeds alone are not a balanced diet for pet birds. While wild birds may eat seeds, they also consume fruits, vegetables, insects, nectar, and other foods depending on species.

A seed-heavy diet is high in fat and deficient in essential nutrients such as protein and vitamins A and D. Over time, this can lead to liver disease, obesity, poor feather quality, skin disease, and other medical problems.

A healthy diet consists of:

- 60 to 70 percent high-quality pelleted bird food
- 30 to 40 percent fresh foods
- Less than 10 percent of the diet as treats or seeds

We recommend pelleted diets from reputable manufacturers such as [Harrison's](#), [Lafeber](#), or [Roudybush](#).

Fresh foods may include:

- Clean, fresh fruits and vegetables, raw or plainly cooked
- Plain cooked beans
- Plain cooked brown rice
- Plain cooked whole wheat pasta

Never feed avocados, eggplant, chocolate, onions, or foods that are high in fat, salt, or sugar.

Food and Water Management

Food should be changed at least once daily and twice daily during warmer months. Remove dropped food from the cage bottom to prevent bacterial growth.



Moist foods such as fruits, vegetables, beans, rice, and pasta should be offered in a separate dish and removed after a few hours.

Fresh water should be available at all times and changed daily. Clean food and water dishes daily with mild soap and water. Do not add supplements or medications to water unless directed by your veterinarian, as this may discourage drinking.

Transitioning to a Healthier Diet

Diet changes must be gradual. Birds can be resistant to new foods and some may stop eating if changes occur too quickly.

Birds often learn what is safe to eat by watching other birds eat. If you have more than one bird, this can be helpful during diet transitions.

If your bird does not have another bird to observe, you can model the behavior yourself. Pretending to eat the foods you want your bird to eat often encourages curiosity and acceptance.

To transition to pellets:

- Place your bird's current diet in the usual dish and layer pellets on top
- Add a second dish containing only pellets near a favorite perch
- Gradually reduce the old diet while increasing pellets over time

Monitor closely to ensure your bird is eating throughout the transition. Some birds convert quickly, while others may take months.

Grooming and Physical Care

Wing trims, nail trims, and beak trims should only be performed by trained professionals.

Wing trimming is a controversial topic. Some feel birds should remain fully flighted, as flying is natural and provides physical and mental enrichment. Others prefer wing trims because they add an additional layer of safety by reducing the risk of collisions with windows, mirrors, fans, or accidental escape. I leave this decision to owner preference. It is important to understand that fully flighted birds are still at risk for accidents, even in careful homes. A properly clipped bird should be able to glide gently to the ground but not gain significant lift. No wing trim can fully prevent flight, and feathers regrow year-round. A bird that could not fly yesterday may be able to fly today. Wing trims are typically needed after molts, often one to three times per year.

Nail trims are important for birds that are frequently handled and are commonly needed every one to two months.

Most birds do not require routine beak trims. Overgrowth may occur due to trauma, genetics, or underlying medical conditions such as liver disease. Any suspected beak abnormality should be evaluated by a veterinarian.

Blood Feathers

Blood feathers are new, growing feathers with an active blood supply. If broken, they can bleed significantly and often must be removed to stop bleeding. Cornstarch or flour may be used temporarily while arranging veterinary care.

Band Removal

Leg bands that are loose, damaged, or split can pose a serious risk if they catch on objects, potentially causing wounds or fractures.



I often recommend band removal for smaller species such as parrotlets, parakeets, and canaries. Your veterinarian will assess whether removal is appropriate for your bird.

Safety in the Home

Many common household items are toxic to birds. Hazards include tobacco smoke, fumes from overheated nonstick cookware, chemical cleaners, aerosols, scented products, and certain houseplants.

Outside the cage, birds are at risk from electrical cords, medications, toxic foods, stovetops, open toilets, and small household objects. Always supervise birds when they are out of the cage.

If you allow your bird on your shoulder, be aware that jewelry is very attractive to birds. Earrings and necklaces may be damaged or lost, so use caution.

Signs of Illness

Birds are experts at hiding illness. In the wild, birds that appear sick are more likely to be left behind by the flock or targeted by predators. As a result, birds often do not show signs of illness until they are seriously ill.

Weight loss is often one of the earliest indicators of disease. We recommend weighing your bird weekly to ensure stability.

Be familiar with what is normal for your bird, including activity level, droppings, appetite, water intake, and vocalization. Changes should be taken seriously. If signs do not improve within 24 to 48 hours or worsen, schedule an appointment.

Seek immediate veterinary care if you notice:

- Fluffed feathers
- Sitting on the bottom of the cage
- Labored or open-mouth breathing
- Tail bobbing
- Regurgitation
- Closed or squinting eyes
- Wings held away from the body
- Bleeding
- Abnormal droppings or discharge

Preventive Veterinary Care

AAHA standards emphasize preventive care and early detection of disease.

Birds are highly skilled at masking illness, often until disease is advanced. Routine veterinary care allows subtle changes to be detected early, when treatment is more likely to be successful.

We recommend establishing care with a veterinarian experienced in avian medicine shortly after purchase. Annual wellness exams typically include a physical exam, fecal testing, and bloodwork to assess overall health.

Preparing for Your Veterinary Visit

For guidance on safely transporting your bird and preparing for appointments, please see our “Bringing Your Bird to the Veterinary Hospital” handout, available on our website or by request.



Avian Bornavirus and Proventricular Dilatation Disease in Pet Birds – What You Need to Know

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What Is Avian Bornavirus?

Avian Bornavirus (ABV) is a group of RNA viruses that can infect many bird species, especially parrots and other psittacines. ABV has been identified worldwide and is best known for its association with Proventricular Dilatation Disease (PDD)—also called neuropathic ganglioneuritis or avian ganglioneuritis. ([Lafeber Company](#))

PDD is a chronic inflammatory disease that can affect the nerves controlling the digestive tract and nervous system. Birds with PDD have trouble digesting food properly and may eventually develop neurologic signs. ([Vca](#))

Not all birds infected with ABV will get PDD—some may carry the virus lifelong without symptoms, while others develop serious disease. ([Lafeber Company](#))

How Does Bornavirus Cause Disease?

- ABV infects nervous tissue and can cause inflammation of the nerve ganglia that control digestion, movement, and balance. ([Lafeber Company](#))
- The disease course is variable: some birds show no signs for years, others develop progressive illness, and some may die without warning. ([PMC](#))
- Proventricular dilatation (enlargement of the glandular stomach) and poor motility lead to undigested food in droppings, weight loss, and malnutrition when PDD develops. ([Vca](#))



What Are Common Clinical Signs?

Signs vary with the affected organ systems and may include:

Digestive Signs

- Weight loss despite eating
- Regurgitation or vomiting
- Undigested food in droppings
- Slow crop emptying

- Diarrhea or scant feces ([Lafeber Company](#))

Neurologic Signs

- Uncoordinated movement (ataxia)
- Weakness
- Head tremors
- Seizures
- Blindness potential ([MSPCA-Angell](#))

Not all infected birds exhibit both digestive and neurologic signs; some may show only one category. ([Lafeber Company](#))

How Is Bornavirus Diagnosed?

Diagnosis is challenging and usually involves a combination of tests:

1. PCR Testing

Detects viral RNA in:

- Blood
- Cloacal swabs
- Choanal swabs

Because shedding is intermittent, a negative PCR doesn't rule out infection. ([MSPCA-Angell](#))

2. Antibody Testing (Serology)

Shows exposure to ABV but doesn't confirm active shedding or disease. Results may be more informative when combined with PCR. ([MSPCA-Angell](#))

3. Crop or Tissue Biopsy

In selected cases, a small surgical sample from the crop or digestive tract can be examined microscopically for inflammatory nerve changes typical of PDD. This can help support a diagnosis but may yield false negatives. ([Lafeber Company](#))

4. Imaging

Radiographs (X-rays) with or without contrast can show enlargement of the proventriculus or delayed passage of food. ([Vca](#))

A definitive diagnosis often depends on combining clinical signs with multiple diagnostic tests and veterinary assessment.

What Does a Positive Test Mean?

- A positive PCR or antibody test means the bird has been exposed to or is carrying ABV. ([MSPCA-Angell](#))
- Not all infected birds develop disease. Many ABV-positive birds remain clinically healthy their entire lives. ([Lafeber Company](#))
- A positive result does not guarantee PDD will develop, nor does it always indicate current disease activity. ([Lafeber Company](#))

Is There a Cure or Treatment?

There is no cure or consistently effective antiviral treatment for ABV or PDD. ([MSPCA-Angell](#))

Veterinary management focuses on:

- Supportive care (nutritional support, hydration)
- Treating secondary infections
- Anti-inflammatory therapies (in select cases, at your vet's discretion)

Although some reports suggest anecdotal benefit from anti-inflammatory medications, these are not universally effective and should be used only under veterinary guidance. ([MSPCA-Angell](#))

How Is Bornavirus Spread?

The exact natural route of transmission is still being studied, but ABV is thought to spread most commonly through:

- Fecal–oral contact
- Exposure to infected droppings or feather dust
- Close contact between birds

Because shedding is intermittent and behaviorally mediated, a virus-free environment is difficult to guarantee in multi-bird households. ([Lafeber Company](#))

What About Other Birds in the Home?

Introducing a New Bird

If a current bird has tested positive for ABV or shows signs consistent with PDD:

- Bringing another healthy bird into the same household is not recommended at this time.

Why:

- ABV can be shed intermittently even when birds appear healthy.
- Transmission can occur despite strict quarantine and hygiene.
- There is no reliable way to guarantee a virus-free environment if birds share the same airspace, caretakers, or household surfaces. ([Lafeber Company](#))

Separate housing may reduce risk, but it cannot eliminate it completely given the nature of ABV and bird interactions.

Practical Takeaways for Owners

Bornavirus is a complex and evolving topic.

Here's what is key for you to understand:

- Many birds carry ABV without ever becoming sick.
- A positive test alone does not mean your bird will develop PDD.
- Diagnosing disease relies on a combination of tests and clinical signs.

- There is no cure; treatment focuses on supportive care.
- Introducing additional birds is high risk when ABV is present in the home.

Your veterinarian can guide you through testing, interpretation, and long-term management strategies tailored to your bird's situation.

Need Support?

If you are considering testing, worried about signs, or thinking about another bird, please consult your avian veterinarian. They can help you understand the risks and develop a plan that aligns with your birds' health and your goals.



Avian Influenza (Bird Flu) in Poultry

– 2025 Update –

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Bird flu (influenza A) is a contagious respiratory disease of birds. It spreads in bird secretions and contaminated dust. There is no at-home treatment; suspected cases must be reported immediately. Your best defenses are everyday biosecurity and fast reporting.

What it is

- **Cause:** Influenza A viruses that infect birds (waterfowl and shorebirds are the main reservoirs). Some strains infect domestic poultry (chickens, turkeys, ducks) and occasionally people and other mammals.
- **Strain severity:**
 - LPAI (low pathogenic): often mild signs in poultry.
 - HPAI (high pathogenic): can cause severe disease and sudden death in poultry.

Why this matters now (2024–2025)

- H5N1 (HPAI) has affected commercial and backyard flocks nationwide since early 2022, and was detected in U.S. dairy cattle in March 2024; animal-to-human risk remains low for the public, higher for people with unprotected, close animal exposure.
- Cats and other mammals have been infected (including pets on affected farms); avoid raw milk and raw poultry exposure to pets.
- H7N9 (HPAI) was confirmed in a Mississippi broiler breeder flock on March 12, 2025—the first U.S. commercial HPAI H7 detection since 2017.

How it spreads

- Direct contact with infected birds (saliva, nasal secretions, feces) and contaminated dust, litter, equipment, clothing, and shoes.
- Virus can hitchhike on people, vehicles, feeders, egg trays, and live-bird swaps; migratory waterfowl move viruses between regions.

Signs in poultry (one, some, or all)

- Sudden death in otherwise normal birds
- Extreme lethargy, drop in feed/water intake
- Respiratory signs: coughing, sneezing, gasping, nasal discharge
- Egg changes: sharp fall in production, soft/misshapen eggs
- Head/skin changes: purple/blue combs/wattles/legs; swollen head/eyelids/wattles/legs
- Nervous signs: loss of balance, falling, twisted neck (torticollis)
- Diarrhea

Alert: One unexplained death happens; many sick/dead birds is not normal. Report immediately.

Report sick or dead birds: Call your State Veterinarian or USDA at 1-866-536-7593. They will advise on sampling, testing, and control steps.

Human & pet safety (practical rules)

- Don't touch sick/dead wild birds or poultry with bare hands. Use gloves and a mask/respirator, then wash hands.
 - No raw milk or raw dairy from any source; use only pasteurized products. Keep pets away from spilled milk and unpasteurized products. (Pasteurization inactivates H5N1.)
 - Keep cats and dogs away from barns, carcasses, and raw poultry/eggs; indoor-only for cats during nearby outbreaks.
 - Public risk is low, but people with close animal exposure should use PPE and follow health-department guidance.
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Diagnosis & management

- **Testing:** PCR at an approved lab. Authorities coordinate sampling.
 - **Treatment:** There is no approved treatment for flocks; control relies on quarantine, depopulation, disposal, and cleaning/disinfection directed by animal-health officials. (Do not self-medicate or sell/move birds.)
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Prevention that works: Biosecurity, every day

Use this 10-point checklist:

1. Control entry: Locked coop/house; signs; limit visitors and vehicle traffic. Keep a log of people/vehicles entering.
2. Dedicated gear: Barn-only boots/clothes; boot dip at entry; provide disposable boot covers for visitors.
3. Clean → Disinfect: Remove organic matter, then apply an EPA-listed disinfectant for avian influenza at label contact time; allow to dry. Repeat for crates, egg flats, and tools.
4. Hands last: Wash hands on entry/exit; no food/drink in bird areas.
5. Separate ages & species: Brooders and growers in separate air space. Don't mix domestic ducks/geese with chickens/turkeys.
6. Water control: Keep birds off ponds/ditches used by wild waterfowl; protect open water and feeders from wild-bird access.
7. Rodent & pest control: Tight feed storage; control rodents and insects.
8. Quarantine new/returning birds 30 days; monitor temp, appetite, droppings daily.

9. No swaps during outbreaks: Avoid shows/live-bird markets if HPAI is active in your region.
10. Dead bird protocol: Double-bag, label, refrigerate (not freeze) for testing if instructed; disinfect contact surfaces; change PPE.

Vaccination & movement

- **Vaccination:** In the U.S., HPAI vaccination is regulated and not routinely available to backyard owners; policies may change by state and outbreak status. Consult your State Veterinarian before purchasing, importing, or using any AI vaccine.
- **Movement:** During outbreaks, expect movement controls on birds, eggs, manure, and equipment from affected zones; comply with official directives to protect neighboring farms.

If you suspect bird flu — do this now

1. Isolate affected birds; stop all movements on/off the property.
2. Call your veterinarian or the USDA hotline 1-866-536-7593 for next steps.
3. Start entry controls & PPE (boots, gloves, mask); set up boot baths.
4. Document: headcounts, ages, onset, signs, recent purchases/visits, feed/water sources.
5. Clean & disinfect high-touch areas; prevent wild-bird access to feed/water.

Trusted resources & reporting

- USDA APHIS — Avian Influenza: Situation updates, biosecurity, and response playbooks. Hotline for sick/dead domestic birds: 1-866-536-7593.
- CDC — Avian Influenza (H5N1) in Animals & People: Current risk to humans and PPE for high-exposure settings.
- FDA — Food Safety During HPAI Events: Pasteurization and consumer guidance.
- AVMA — Avian Influenza Guidance: Veterinary summaries and practice resources.
- State Veterinarian / Diagnostic Lab: Testing, sampling, and movement control (find on your state Dept. of Agriculture site).

We can help

- Rapid triage by phone, coordination with state labs, and on-farm biosecurity audits.
- Custom checklists for your setup (backyard or commercial) and training for family/staff.

Questions or reporting help? Contact our veterinary team.



Bringing Your Pet Bird to the Veterinary Hospital

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We follow AAHA standards that prioritize patient safety, gentle handling, and minimizing stress. Birds are especially sensitive to handling, temperature changes, and unfamiliar environments. With the right preparation, you can help make your bird's visit safer and more comfortable.

Preparing Your Bird for the Appointment

Please do not offer food or water for two hours before your appointment.

Birds store food and water in a structure called the crop. When the crop is full, there is an increased risk of regurgitation or aspiration during handling, diagnostic testing, or grooming procedures. This includes blood collection, X-rays, nail trims, and wing trims.

Some birds also experience motion sickness during travel. Fasting reduces this risk and helps keep your bird safe during the visit.

Reducing Stress and Anxiety

Reducing fear and stress is an important part of quality veterinary care.

Some birds benefit from calming support prior to their visit. Your veterinarian may recommend gabapentin, a prescription medication that is safe for birds and can reduce anxiety.

Some owners choose to use [Rescue Remedy](#), an over-the-counter flower essence. This may be given as 1 to 2 drops by mouth 1 to 2 hours before the appointment or added to your bird's water the night before.

In some cases, a short-acting injectable sedative may be recommended at the hospital. If this is needed, your bird will remain with you in a quiet exam room for approximately 15 to 20 minutes while the medication takes effect. This allows procedures to be performed more safely and with less stress.

Safe Transport and Carrier Selection

AAHA standards emphasize safe transport and controlled handling for all patients.

For most birds, a secure carrier is safer than transporting them in a full-size cage. Cages are difficult to keep warm and may contain toys, food bowls, or grates that increase the risk of injury during handling.

A secure carrier helps maintain warmth, reduces visual stress, and allows veterinary staff to handle your bird safely.

Recommended carrier features include:

- A solid plastic carrier similar to a cat carrier
- Side and top access doors
- Enough room for your bird to stand comfortably
- A towel on the bottom for stable footing

A perch is usually not necessary. During colder months, covering the carrier with a blanket helps retain warmth and reduces stimulation.

Bird backpacks or bird-specific carriers are acceptable if they provide safe access and are easy to clean. Open wire transport cages are not recommended.



Bring Your Bird's Normal Diet

AAHA guidelines emphasize maintaining normal routines whenever possible.

Bird diets are highly individualized. Please bring your bird's regular food with you, especially if there is a chance your bird may need to remain at the hospital longer than expected. Familiar foods help reduce stress and encourage eating.

There is no need to bring water for travel with your bird.

Support After Grooming

After nail or wing trims, some birds may temporarily have difficulty balancing, especially during travel.

If your bird will be standing on a perch, wrapping the perch with vet wrap or using a soft rope perch can improve traction and help prevent slipping.

Shoulder Transport Is Not Safe

Even well-trained birds can become startled in unfamiliar environments.

AAHA safety standards require that all birds arrive in an escape-proof enclosure. Transporting birds on a shoulder increases the risk of falls, flight, and injury and is not permitted.

Our Commitment to Your Bird

As an AAHA-accredited practice, we are committed to providing care that is safe, compassionate, and evidence-based. If you have questions about transporting your bird or preparing for your appointment, please contact the hospital and speak with one of our veterinary technicians. We are happy to help you prepare for a smooth visit.



Avian Wing Trims

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Wing trims are a management tool, not a default. The goal is controlled glide (no gain in altitude) while preserving balance, confidence, and the ability to land safely. Over-trimming causes injuries and behavior problems. Whenever possible, pair trims with training and environmental safety.

Should my bird be trimmed?

Consider a trim if any of the following apply:

- The home cannot be made reliably safe (open doors/windows, ceiling fans, high mirrors, hot stoves, predators, tall stairwells).
- The bird repeatedly escapes rooms, flies into glass, or shows risky exploratory flights you cannot supervise.
- The bird's medical status (e.g., neurologic disease, poor vision) makes full flight unsafe.

Consider keeping flight with training/safety if:

- You can supervise in a bird-safe room (see checklist below).
- You commit to recall training, target training, and controlled exercise.
- You use a properly fitted harness for outdoor time (never rely on a trim to prevent fly-offs outdoors).

**** Never trim a pre-fledge baby.****

Allow full fledging and flight skills first; early trims can cause long-term fear, clumsiness, and behavior issues.

Safety plan for flighted birds

- Close doors/windows; stove/oven off; ceiling fans off; cover or mark large windows and mirrors.
- Provide landing stations (perches/stands) at different heights; teach recall to each station.
- Keep cats/dogs out during flight time.
- Use visual decals on glass at 2–4" spacing to reduce collisions.
- Schedule daily flight sessions (5–15 minutes) to meet exercise needs.

What a good trim looks like

- **Objective:** controlled glide with minimal forward speed; no vertical gain; safe landing without keel/tail impact.
- **Symmetry:** trim both wings evenly; asymmetrical trims cause rolling and crashes.
- **Conservative first trim:** start with 4–6 primary feathers (species/size dependent). Small, light birds (budgies, cockatiels, lovebirds) may need 6–8; heavy birds often need fewer.

- **Feather selection:** reduce primary feather surface starting from the most distal primaries inward; avoid cutting past the coverts so remaining feathers shield blood feathers.
- **No secondary or tail trims**—these disrupt lift control and braking.

Absolutely avoid

- Over-trimming to the level of the coverts (“chop clip”).
- Asymmetrical one-wing clips.
- Trimming blood feathers (new pin feathers with visible shafts).
- DIY trims without restraint/visualization—risk of hemorrhage and pain.



Before the trim (clinic checklist)

- Review medical history, recent molt, diet, and behavior.
- Weigh the bird; check keel muscle (BCS).
- Inspect for blood feathers and wing integrity.
- Discuss owner goals: indoor safety only, recall training, outdoor harness, etc.
- Obtain consent after explaining risks/benefits.

How we perform the trim

1. Restraint by trained staff; towel as needed to protect wings.
2. Visualize each primary; identify and avoid blood feathers.
3. Remove the minimum number of primaries to meet goals; reassess aerodynamics after each pair.
4. Glide test in a soft, enclosed room: low launch to assess altitude gain, speed, and landing.
5. Adjust one feather at a time if needed; stop when a safe glide is achieved.

If a blood feather is accidentally cut and bleeds, we can pluck the feather and apply hemostasis; monitor closely and provide analgesia as needed.

Aftercare & rechecks

- Supervise all flight attempts for the first 48–72 hours; test in a low, padded area.
- Watch for hard landings, chest/tail bruising, or new fear responses. Call us if noted.
- Expect regrowth after a molt. Rechecks typically every 6–12 weeks depending on species, season, and metabolism.
- Pair with behavioral training (recall, step-up, stationing) and foraging to maintain confidence.

Risks & how we mitigate them

- **Falls/keel injury** → Conservative trim + landing stations + glide tests.

- **Psychological stress/anxiety** → Low-stress handling, short sessions, positive reinforcement.
- **Feather damage** → Clean cuts with sharp tools; avoid fraying; do not cut into coverts.
- **Pain/bleeding** → Careful inspection; avoid blood feathers; emergency protocol in place.

Alternatives & complements

- **Recall training and targetting** (daily micro-sessions).
- **Harness training** (aviation-grade harness; gradual desensitization).
- **Environmental engineering:** bird-safe room, decals on glass, fans locked off, doors with self-closers.
- **Nail trims** to improve grip and landing stability.

Wing trims are customized to your bird and your home. We start conservatively, test, and pair the trim with training and environmental safety to keep your bird confident—and safe.

FAQs

Will my bird still be able to fly?

After a conservative trim, most birds can glide short distances but **cannot** gain altitude.

How long does a trim last?

Until the next molt replaces primaries—often 6–12 weeks before partial function returns, species- and season-dependent, can be as long as 6 months. Also can be a short amount of time if we trim the wings just before a molt.

Can I take a trimmed bird outside without a carrier/harness?

No. Startle flight and wind gusts can carry even trimmed birds. Use a carrier or harness outdoors.

My bird seems fearful after a trim—what now?

Reduce height demands, add landing platforms, do 1–2 minute positive-reinforcement sessions; contact us if fear persists.

Resources

- **Association of Avian Veterinarians (AAV)** — Find an avian-experienced veterinarian.
- **LafeberVet** — Husbandry, behavior, and flight training articles.
- **Avian harness training guides** — Ask us for our step-by-step protocol and recommended harness brands.
- **Recall training plan** — Available from our clinic; we can coach you through week-by-week goals.



Bumblefoot (Pododermatitis) in Birds

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Bumblefoot is a pressure and infection problem of the feet. It starts with skin damage from improper perches, poor footing, excess weight, or inactivity and can progress to deep infection (arthritis/osteomyelitis). Early, systematic care works; late cases need surgery.

Who gets it?

- Common: poultry, raptors, waterfowl; can affect parrots and other perching birds.
- Higher risk: heavier birds, sedentary indoor parrots, birds on wire/rough or uniform-diameter dowels, wet/dirty bedding, obese or vitamin-A-deficient birds.



Chicken Bumblefoot Lesion

What you'll see

- Pink → red pressure spots on footpads or toes; shiny skin, flaking or scabs.
- Swelling, heat, pain, lameness, reluctance to perch/walk, resting on hocks/keel.
- Abscess/ulcer, dark central plug ("core").
- In advanced cases: draining tracts, toe deformity, joint swelling, systemic signs (lethargy, poor appetite, weight loss).
-  **Red flags (urgent):** black scab with surrounding swelling, visible pus, toe/joint swelling, fevered bird, or the bird won't bear weight.



Duck Bumblefoot Lesion

Why it happens

- **Mechanical:** Constant pressure on the same skin (uniform dowels, hard/wire floors, concrete, slick plastic) → micro-tears → callus → ulcer.
- **Microbial:** Bacteria (often Staphylococcus) enter damaged skin → infection in soft tissue → tendon/joint/bone if untreated.

How we grade it

- **Grade 1:** Redness/callus; no ulcer.
- **Grade 2:** Superficial ulcer/scab; mild swelling.
- **Grade 3:** Deep ulcer/abscess; firm core; moderate swelling/pain.
- **Grade 4:** Joint/tendon involvement (arthritis/tenosynovitis).
- **Grade 5:** Bone involvement (osteomyelitis) and/or systemic illness.

Grades 1–2: outpatient care usually works. Grades 3–5: require aggressive veterinary therapy and often surgery.

Veterinary diagnosis

- Full exam and foot map (location/size).
 - Culture & sensitivity (fine-needle or swab) to select antibiotics.
 - Radiographs for suspected bone/joint spread; ultrasound if needed.
 - Screen contributing issues: weight, vitamin A, arthritis, overgrown nails, endocrine disease.
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Treatment ladder (your vet will tailor this)

Grade 1–2 (early)

- Perch/footing fix (see Prevention below); weight control.
- Soaks 1–2×/day (e.g., dilute chlorhexidine per label or betadine. Epsom salt soaks can be beneficial as well). Pat dry fully with a clean cotton cloth.
- Topicals: Sometimes veterinary barrier ointments/honey-based gels are used depending on the status of the lesion; no caustics.
- Off-loading bandage: soft padded wrap with “donut” pad to take pressure off lesion; change every day initially. Or keep on a very clean surface that is monitored every 3–4 hours.
- Analgesia/anti-inflammatory as prescribed.
- Recheck in 7–10 days.

Grade 3 (abscess/core)

- As above plus:
- Debridement of necrotic tissue/abscess by a veterinarian; pack with appropriate dressing.
- Systemic antibiotics guided by culture (usually 2–4 weeks).
- Strict bandage schedule and controlled perching.
- Rechecks weekly until granulation tissue forms and size is shrinking.

Grade 4–5 (joint/bone)

- Imaging-guided plan, long-course antibiotics (often 4–8+ weeks).
- Surgical debridement; occasionally partial digit amputation to stop spread.
- Advanced dressings (hydrogel, alginate, silver, or honey dressings as indicated).
- Physiotherapy for stance and grip once pain controlled.
- Consider splints/orthotics to redistribute pressure during healing.

Do not cut out “cores” at home. You can drive infection deeper and cause severe pain/bleeding. This is widely reported online, in our experience it leads to severe pain/bleeding and deeper infection.

Species-specific notes

- **Parrots:** Replace uniform dowels; avoid sandpaper perches; keep nails properly trimmed for even weight bearing.
 - **Raptors:** Ensure prey is dead or safely dispatched; perch coverings (leather/astroturf) must be correct diameter and texture; hygiene between perches.
 - **Waterfowl:** Keep dry bedding; manage mud; provide clean water for bathing daily; inspect for foreign bodies between toes; elevate resting platforms.
-

Prevention (the part that really works!)

Perches/footing

- Provide 3–5 different diameters and textures per cage/aviary: natural branches (safe woods), rope, textured PVC wrapped with vet wrap (changed regularly).
- Rule of thumb: a perch should let toes wrap 2/3 around—not fully clenched, not flat.
- Place a soft, wide platform perch for resting; avoid prolonged use of abrasive/sandpaper covers.

Husbandry

- Daily spot-clean, frequent deep cleans; keep litter dry.
- Rotate perch positions monthly to change pressure points.
- Maintain healthy weight (measured portions; daily gram-scale checks).
- Vitamin A–rich diet (pellet-based with leafy greens/orange veg).
- Provide exercise & foraging so birds spend less time static on one perch.

Routine checks

- Inspect feet weekly; catch Grade 1 early.
- Trim nails to prevent altered stance and pressure.

Home care do's & don'ts (while you wait for your appointment)

- **DO:** keep the bird caged on soft, clean footing; pad favorite perches; start gentle once-daily soaks; restrict high climbing/jumping.
- **DON'T:** lance, squeeze, or apply harsh chemicals; don't leave wet feet; don't use adhesive tape directly on skin.

Prognosis

- **Early cases:** good to excellent with perch change + bandaging + targeted meds.
- **Advanced cases:** guarded; require surgery and long follow-up; relapse if risk factors stay the same.

Resources

- Association of Avian Veterinarians (AAV) — Find an avian-experienced veterinarian.
- LafeberVet — Articles on pododermatitis, perching, and husbandry checklists.
- Merck Veterinary Manual (consumer edition) — Overview of bumblefoot and home care basics.
- Raptor center husbandry guides — Perch design and foot care for birds of prey.

Suspect bumblefoot?

- Book an appointment.
- Bring photos of the cage, perches, and flooring
- Note diet, weight trends, and when signs began.
- Early changes prevent surgery.



Feather Destructive Behavior (Feather Picking)

Melissa Magnuson, DVM • Alexandra Kilgore, DVM

Feather picking is a sign, not a diagnosis. Medical problems, pain, hormones, environment, and behavior can all contribute—often more than one at the same time. Early work-up + a structured care plan gives the best chance of improvement.

What it is (and isn't)

- Seen almost exclusively in captive birds; wild birds do not normally self-pluck.
- Ranges from over-preening → barbering → pulling feathers → self-mutilation (skin damage).
- Can occur at any age, species, or sex.

Red flags — call us urgently

- Bleeding, chewed skin, or open wounds
- Sudden onset after toxin exposure (heavy metals, aerosolized chemicals, Teflon/PTFE fumes)
- Rapid weight loss, lethargy, changes in droppings, or respiratory signs

Common contributors (often mixed)

Medical

- **Nutrition:** seed-based diets; hypovitaminosis A; Ca/P imbalance
- **Skin/feather disease:** bacterial, fungal, viral
- **Parasites:** mites (uncommon indoors), Giardia (cockatiels), helminths
- **Systemic illness:** liver, kidney, respiratory disease; endocrine; neoplasia; pain
- **Allergy/irritants:** low humidity, dust, smoke, fragrances, cleaning sprays

Hormonal

- Sexual frustration, photoperiod/lights, nesting sites, pair-bonding with a person/object

Environmental/Behavioral

- Inadequate sleep (<10–12 hrs dark), low humidity, boredom, lack of foraging, unpredictable schedule, limited out-of-cage time, minimal



training/engagement, household changes (moves, visitors, new pets), anxiety

Expect multifactorial causes—plan for medical + environmental + behavior steps together.

Veterinary work-up (stepwise)

1. History & physical exam (body condition, feather map, pain check)
 2. Droppings/choanal/cloacal tests: Gram stain, culture as indicated
 3. CBC, Biochemistry and electrophoresis: (liver/kidney, proteins, Ca, glucose)
 4. Parasite tests: fecal float, Giardia antigen (esp. cockatiels), skin scraping
 5. Feather/skin diagnostics: pulp cytology/culture; biopsy in refractory cases
 6. Endocrine/immune: electrophoresis; targeted viral testing (PBFD, polyoma, bornavirus) when warranted
 7. Imaging: radiographs ± ultrasound if systemic disease suspected
-

Immediate home actions (while awaiting results)

Do

- Provide daily lukewarm showers/misting; target 50–70% humidity (many species thrive higher—ask us for your bird).
- Enforce uninterrupted sleep: dark, quiet room 10–12 hours nightly (use blackout cover/room).
- Start a foraging routine: deliver ≥50% of calories via simple foraging puzzles today (paper cups, paper-wrapped pellets, cardboard trays).
- Create a calm, predictable schedule (feeding, lights, training at consistent times).
- Document triggers: keep a 2-week log (time, activity, people, location, intensity 0–5).

Don't

- Apply over-the-counter creams/oils, lidocaine/benzocaine, or essential oils.
 - Punish, scold, or physically block the bird's beak—it increases anxiety.
 - Change everything at once; we need to see what works.
-

Nutrition upgrade (foundation of care)

- Aim for pellets 60–75% of diet (species-appropriate), fresh vegetables 20–30%, treats/seeds ≤5–10%.
 - Add vitamin A-rich vegetables (dark leafy greens, orange colored vegetables).
 - No seed-only diets. If on seeds, begin a 2–4 week conversion (mixing, crumble-over, morning-only pellets, warm “mash” technique). See Seed to Pellet diet change.
 - Provide clean water; avoid flavored/sweetened waters.
 - Consider omega-3 support (per vet guidance) for skin/feather quality.
-

Environment reset

- **Humidity:** 50–70% baseline; higher for rainforest species (monitor with hygrometer).
 - **Air quality:** no smoke, fragrances, aerosol cleaners; avoid PTFE/PFOA/PFA cookware fumes.
 - **Light/photoperiod:** 10–12 hrs dark; consistent dawn/dusk cycle; consider full-spectrum lighting without heat hazard (timers) if egg-laying is not a concern.
 - **Enclosure:** correctly sized; multiple perch textures; soft landing zones; rotate perches monthly.
 - **Safety:** heavy-metal exposure control (no peeling paint, unsafe toys).
-

Behavior & enrichment protocol (first 4 weeks)

Daily (10–20 min total):

- 2–3 micro-training sessions (targeting/step-up/foraging cues) with high-value rewards.
- Provide shreddables (paper, palm leaves, untreated cardboard). Replace before they're destroyed.
- Preening alternative: cotton rope/loofah/raffia preening toys near preferred pluck zones.

Weekly:

- Toy rotation (at least 4-item rotation; change location/height).
- Foraging difficulty increases gradually (from open to closed containers; multiple small stations).
- Routine review: update the trigger log; note best/worst days.

Reinforcement strategy:

- Reward calm beak-busy behaviors (chewing toys, foraging) before plucking typically occurs (replace the habit loop).
 - Expect an extinction burst (temporary worsening) in week 1–2; stay consistent.
-

Medical interventions (only with a veterinarian)

- Analgesia/neuropathic pain (e.g., gabapentin, onsior or meloxicam) when pain is suspected.
- Antimicrobials/antiparasitics only with positive findings/strong evidence (e.g., Giardia).
- Hormonal modulation: photoperiod control; environmental removal of nest triggers; medical options case-by-case.
- Behavioral meds (case-selected): SSRIs (e.g., fluoxetine), clomipramine, short-term anxiolytics, or haloperidol in severe mutilation—plus behavior plan.
- Collars/jackets: soft/modular designs to protect skin short-term while underlying causes are treated; monitor for stress and skin injury. We recommend e-collars made by Protective Petals by Pam. <https://www.facebook.com/ProtectiveParrotPetalsByPam/>

Medication without husbandry change rarely succeeds. Combine treatments.

Measuring progress

- Pluck map photos weekly (same lighting/pose).
- Body weight 2–3×/week at the same time of day.
- Behavior log: triggers down, foraging minutes up, sleep consistent.
- Reassess at 2, 4, and 8 weeks; escalate/adjust plan based on data.

FAQs

Will my bird be “cured”?

- Many improve; some need long-term management. Early action helps.

Are mites the usual cause?

- No—uncommon in indoor parrots. Don’t treat blindly. Test first.

Should I bathe daily?

- Most birds benefit from daily misting/showers; allow full dry in a warm, draft-free room.

Can clothing/vests help?

- Sometimes, as part of a plan; avoid overheating and chafing.



Your next steps

1. Book a comprehensive exam and baseline labs.
2. Start the Immediate home actions and nutrition upgrade today.
3. Keep a two-week trigger & behavior log and bring it to your visit.
4. Ask for our 4-week enrichment calendar and diet conversion plan tailored to your species.

We’re partners in this. Early, consistent, data-driven care gives your bird the best chance to heal and thrive.



Managing Reproductive Behaviors in Pet Birds

Melissa Magnuson, DVM • Alexandra Kilgore, DVM

Egg laying is normal in female birds, but chronic laying is not. It raises the risk of egg binding, egg yolk peritonitis, cloacal prolapse, hypocalcemia, and pathologic fractures. The fix is multifactorial: environment, nutrition, behavior, and (when needed) medical/surgical care.

What “normal” looks like

- Many species lay 2–3 clutches/year in the wild, with clutch size 2–8 eggs depending on species.
- In captivity, indoor light, diet, handling, and access to “nesty” spaces can push some hens into chronic cycles (back-to-back clutches).



Immediate changes (start today)

1. Light & sleep (photoperiod)
 - Target 8–10 hours light and 14–16 hours dark for 3–6 weeks when reproductive signs appear.
 - Use a dark sleep room or blackout cover that fully blocks light and reduces evening activity. Keep bedtime/wake time consistent.
 - Avoid evening screen time and bright kitchen lighting near the cage.
2. Remove reproductive triggers
 - No nests or nesty spaces: block access to dark cubbies, behind furniture, boxes, closets. Add a grate to the cage bottom if she nests in litter.
 - No shreddables during suppression phase (paper bedding, felt huts, tents). Replace with non-nesty toys (chew blocks, stainless bells, acrylic puzzles).
 - Hands off the erogenous zones: restrict petting to head/neck only; avoid back, wings, tail base. Limit prolonged cuddling.
 - Mate cues: If bonded to a person, reduce that person’s contact; rotate caregivers. Separate visually/audibly from a companion bird if pair-bonded.
3. Diet & body condition
 - Shift to pellet-based diet (60–75%) + vegetables (20–30%); limit seeds/nuts to ≤ 5 –10%.

- Reduce high-fat/high-calorie treats and warm, soft “mashes” that can stimulate nesting.
 - Provide measured portions; aim for an ideal body condition score (your vet will help set targets). Daily weight on a gram scale.
 - During active laying only, discuss calcium support (liquid Ca with vitamin D3 per veterinary direction). Cuttlebone alone is insufficient.
4. Work her brain (and beak)
 - Foraging goal: deliver $\geq 50\%$ of daily calories via foraging (paper cups, paper-wrapped pellets, cardboard egg cartons, drilled pine blocks). Increase difficulty weekly.
 - Training: 2–3 short positive-reinforcement sessions/day (targeting, perch-to-perch, recall). Keep sessions upbeat and brief.
 5. Rearrange the world
 - Weekly environment reset: move perches, toys, and bowl locations; change cage orientation or room (if not stressful). Slight, frequent changes prevent “nest claiming.”

Dummy eggs (when a clutch starts)

- Do not remove fresh eggs one by one—that can drive replacement laying.
- Allow her to complete the clutch, then swap for dummy eggs and let her incubate until interest fades (usually 1–3 weeks). Remove all eggs at once when she abandons them.
- Clean and return dummy eggs as needed so they remain intact and unappealing. If you do not have dummy eggs, the regular eggs can stay if she is a single bird. If she has a male mate, they could be fertilized. If you do not want babies, you will need to invest in dummy eggs.

When home changes aren't enough

Medical options (vet-directed)

- GnRH agonists (e.g., leuprolide/Lupron injections): may reduce laying; often given as a series, then tapered; variable duration/response.
- Deslorelin implant (Suprelorin®): placed under the skin under light anesthesia; can suppress reproductive drive for 6–12 months in many birds; may need replacement.
- Analgesia/anti-inflammatories: if painful ovulation or oviduct inflammation suspected.
- Salpingohysterectomy (oviduct removal; ovary typically left in place): reserved for selected cases (e.g., repeated soft-shelled eggs, life-threatening complications). Carries significant anesthetic/surgical risk and does not prevent future ovulation or all yolk-related issues.

Medication or surgery without environmental and behavioral change usually fails long-term. Combine approaches.

Emergency — call immediately

- Straining on cage floor >30 minutes without passing an egg

- Blood or prolapsed tissue at the vent
- Marked lethargy, puffed posture, weakness, open-mouth breathing
- Bulging abdomen or sudden inability to perch

These can be life-threatening (egg binding, prolapse, peritonitis). Seek emergency avian care.

Vet visit: what we'll check

- Full exam; body weight & condition, pelvic palpation
 - X-rays to assess egg position, shell quality, and bone density
 - Bloodwork, including calcium and total protein; +/- progesterone/estradiol when indicated
 - Review diet, lighting, handling, environment; build a written plan
-

4-week suppression plan (starter template)

- **Week 0 (today):** blackout schedule; remove nest cues; start foraging $\geq 50\%$; measure food; begin weight log.
 - **Week 1:** rearrange cage; increase training to 3 micro-sessions/day; block all dark hideouts.
 - **Week 2:** swap any eggs for dummy eggs and allow sitting; reassess calories; advance foraging difficulty.
 - **Week 3–4:** maintain dark cycle; continue weekly cage changes; review trigger log with your vet; consider medical options if laying continues.
-

Resources & tools

- Find an avian veterinarian: Association of Avian Veterinarians (AAV) — “Find-a-Vet” directory.
 - Behavior & enrichment: LafeberVet — articles on chronic egg laying, foraging plans, and husbandry.
 - Dummy eggs: Commercial sources (e.g., dummyeggs.com) by species size; your clinic may stock sets.
 - Avian nutrition: Species-specific pellet guides from reputable manufacturers; ask us for a conversion handout.
 - Emergency care: Your local avian-experienced emergency hospital; keep their number posted on the cage.
-

Your next steps

1. Begin the photoperiod plan tonight (set timers).
2. Remove nests/shreddables, restrict petting to head/neck only.
3. Start foraging and diet changes; log weights daily.
4. Schedule a vet exam to assess calcium status and discuss medical options.

We're partners in this. With consistency, most hens reduce or stop laying and return to healthy routines.



Transitioning from Seed Diets to Pellets and Fresh Foods

A healthy diet is one of the most important factors in your bird's long-term health. Many companion birds are raised on seed diets, but seeds alone are nutritionally incomplete and can lead to obesity, vitamin deficiencies, liver disease, poor feather quality, and shortened lifespan.

A balanced diet should include:

- High-quality pelleted food as the foundation
- Fresh vegetables and limited fruits
- Seeds only as treats, not the main diet

Why Pellets Matter

Pelleted diets are formulated to provide:

- Balanced vitamins and minerals
- Adequate protein
- Proper calcium and vitamin A levels
- Consistent nutrition in every bite

Seed diets allow birds to “select out” favorite seeds, leading to serious nutritional imbalances over time.

Be Patient: Conversion Takes Time

⚠️ Never force a sudden diet change.

Birds can starve themselves if stressed or confused by rapid changes.



Converting from seeds to pellets is a gradual process. Some birds convert quickly, but others may take 6–12 months. The key is to not give up! It is always possible. You must be more patient than your bird.

Tips for Converting Birds from Seeds to Pellets

Start Slowly

- Continue offering seeds initially while introducing pellets daily
- Expect curiosity before acceptance

Make Pellets More Appealing

- Sprinkle pellets on white paper or a mirror at the bottom of the cage (Especially helpful for budgies and small birds)
- The mirror can trigger “competition” behavior
- White backgrounds help pellets stand out visually

Reduce Distractions

- Try a temporary conversion cage with:
 - Fewer toys
 - Simple perches
 - Food placed on the cage floorThis helps birds focus on the new food.

Gradually Reduce Seeds

1. Offer seeds for 1–2 hours per day
2. Remove seeds and replace with pellets
3. After a few days, reduce seed time to:
 - 30 minutes
 - Then 15 minutes
4. Continue decreasing until seeds are no longer offered daily

Use Social Learning

- Eat “with” your bird during meals. Birds learn to eat from watching other birds. If you are their flock, then they watch you eat and will want what you have.
- Move pellets around on a plate with a fork or fingers
- Birds are flock animals and often try foods they see others enjoying
- If you have multiple birds, place a pellet-eating bird near a seed eater to act as a role model

Enhance Flavor and Texture

- Slightly moisten pellets with:
 - Warm water
 - Unsweetened natural fruit juice
 - Recovery or hand-feeding formulas (as directed)
- Some birds prefer softened textures at first

Try Different Pellet Types

- Some birds prefer:
 - Larger or coarse pellets
 - Crushed pellets
 - Warmed pellets
- Spicy or aromatic pellets often encourage interest

Don’t Give Up

If conversion stalls:

- Return to the familiar seed diet briefly
- Try again after a short break
- Persistence matters—eventually most birds convert

Pellet options

- ☐ Harrisons
- ☐ Roudybush
- ☐ Lafeber
- ☐ Pretty Bird
- ☐ Kaytee Exact
- ☐ ZuPreem

Adding Fresh “Human” Foods

Pellets should make up 60–80% of the diet once conversion is complete.

Vegetables (Offer Daily)

Focus on nutrient-dense options:

- Dark leafy greens (kale, collards, mustard greens)
- Bell peppers
- Broccoli
- Carrots
- Squash
- Green beans

Fruits (Offer in Small Amounts)

Fruit should be limited due to sugar content.

- Berries
- Apples (no seeds)
- Mango
- Papaya
- Melon

Foods to Avoid

- ☒ Avocado
- Chocolate
- Caffeine
- Alcohol
- Onion and garlic
- Salty or sugary foods
- ☒ Foods cooked with butter or seasoning



Seeds and Treats

- Seeds should make up no more than 10% of the diet
- Use seeds for:
 - Training

- Bonding
- Special rewards

Monitoring During Conversion

- Weigh your bird weekly on a gram scale
- Watch droppings for changes
- Call your veterinarian if:
 - Your bird stops eating
 - Weight drops
 - Energy level decreases significantly

Final Thoughts

Converting from seeds to pellets is one of the best investments you can make in your bird's health. It takes time, creativity, and patience—but birds on balanced diets:

- Live longer
- Have better feather quality
- Have stronger immune systems
- Are less prone to liver disease and obesity

If you have concerns or need help with conversion strategies, contact your veterinarian for guidance tailored to your bird's species and health status.



Heavy Metal Exposure in Pet Birds

What Every Bird Owner Should Know

Heavy metal poisoning is one of the most common and preventable emergencies in pet birds. Birds are especially vulnerable because they explore the world with their beaks. Chewing, shredding, and investigating objects is normal behavior, but it also puts birds at high risk of ingesting toxic metals.

Even very small amounts of certain metals can cause severe illness or death. For example, a single drop of lead solder can be fatal to an Amazon parrot.

Why Birds Are at High Risk

- Birds are naturally curious and attracted to shiny objects
- They chew as part of normal foraging behavior
- Their small body size means toxins reach dangerous levels quickly
- Many toxic metals are found in common household items

Heavy metal poisoning can occur from ingestion or chronic low-level exposure.

The Most Common Toxic Metals

Lead (Most Dangerous)

Lead is extremely toxic and causes both neurologic and gastrointestinal disease.

Common household sources of lead:

- Bells with lead clappers
- Bird toys weighted with lead
- Stained or leaded glass
- Lead solder
- Venetian blinds
- Curtain weights
- Linoleum and vinyl flooring
- Plaster and caulking materials
- Lead-based paint (homes built before 1978)
- Old mirror backing
- Antique or imported metal cages



Zinc

Zinc poisoning is also common and often associated with cages or hardware.

Common sources of zinc:

- Newly galvanized wire cages

- Cage enamel or powder coatings
- Pennies (especially newer ones)
- Batteries
- Zippers
- Nuts, bolts, washers
- Galvanized food and water bowls

Other Metals

(Less Common but Still Dangerous)

- Copper
- Mercury
- Cadmium

These are less frequently involved but can still cause toxicity if ingested.

Signs of Heavy Metal Toxicity

Clinical signs may be subtle at first or sudden and severe.

Digestive Signs

- Regurgitation
- Delayed crop emptying
- Diarrhea
- Black or tar-colored stools
- Blood in the urine portion of droppings

Neurologic Signs

- Loss of balance (ataxia)
- Weakness or paralysis of one or both legs or wings
- Head tilt
- Tremors or seizures
- Blindness

General Signs

- Lethargy
- Weight loss
- Poor appetite
- Sudden behavior changes



Any neurologic signs or seizures are an emergency.

What To Do If You Suspect Exposure

- Do not wait.
- Do not try home remedies.
- Call your veterinarian immediately.



Early treatment dramatically improves survival.

How Heavy Metal Poisoning Is Diagnosed

Diagnosis is based on:

- History of possible exposure
- Radiographs (X-rays) showing metal in the gastrointestinal tract
- Blood lead and zinc levels

Because test results may take time, treatment often begins before results return.

Treatment

Treatment depends on the metal involved and severity of signs.

Common components of treatment include:

- Supportive care (fluids, nutrition, temperature support)
- Anti-seizure medications if needed
- Chelation therapy (medications that bind metals and allow removal from the body)
- Treatments to move metal out of the gastrointestinal tract

Important differences:

- Lead may be stored in bones and released later, requiring repeat treatment
- Zinc is not stored in bone and usually responds more quickly to treatment

Hospitalization is often required.

Preventing Heavy Metal Exposure

Prevention is critical and far easier than treatment.

Safety Tips for Bird Owners

- Remove all known sources of lead and zinc from your home
- Use only stainless steel food and water bowls
- Avoid galvanized cages or have them professionally treated
- Test paint chips or suspect materials for lead (home test kits available)
- Supervise birds whenever they are outside the cage
- Do not allow chewing on:
 - Walls or moldings
 - Metal fixtures
 - Windows or mirrors
 - Furniture hardware
- Inspect toys regularly for exposed metal parts

Key Takeaway

Heavy metal poisoning is common, serious, and preventable. Birds hide illness well, and symptoms often appear after significant exposure has already occurred.

If you suspect your bird has ingested or chewed on metal:

Call your veterinarian immediately. Early treatment saves lives.