

## Illness and Disease



This fact sheet explains what to look for if your birds are unwell.

## GENERAL

Health care in general terms relates to good husbandry. This means providing the correct diet and environment for the species concerned and also establishing a routine for cleaning and general hygiene. Some bird rooms are so spotless that you could almost eat your food off the floor and others are so filthy that you have to wipe your feet when you leave them. Both are detrimental to the birds health. The first does not allow the birds to build up any natural resistance to diseases, while the latter is only one step away from a full scale epidemic.

Prevention is better than cure, so in order to prevent illness or disease, bacteria and other organisms must be kept at a sufficiently low level so that the birds can cope with them. Therefore it is necessary to make sure that the birds are kept strong enough to fight off any disease by ensuring that their immune system is working at its maximum efficiency. Good hygiene will help limit the number of bacteria and disease organisms that the birds are exposed to.

The most important factor in ensuring that a bird is kept healthy and strong enough to fight off disease is a good diet. A bird fed on a poor diet will deteriorate to a level where it will succumb to illness, while a bird fed on a balanced and varied diet will thrive. An important aspect of a good diet is to ensure that nothing is missing especially any deficiencies of vitamins and minerals.

Another very important factor in both prevention and control of any disease outbreaks is good hygiene practice. Many diseases are spread via droppings, contaminated food and water; so dishes, drinkers and perches should be kept clean and changed as necessary, soaked in a bleach solution, scrubbed and rinsed thoroughly. Normally hot water and a good quality detergent are sufficient for routine cage cleaning when disease is not present. Certain disinfectants should only be used when there is a disease occurrence.

When cleaning cages and birdrooms remember to remove as much of the remaining droppings, soft food etc. before wiping down as these may reduce the effectiveness of the disinfectant/ detergent solution. Also if the solution is not of the correct strength the efficiency will be reduced possibly leading to a build up of resistant bacteria or disease organisms.

Changing the type of disinfectant/ detergent used from time to time will help reduce the possibility of this. Ensure the area is rinsed and dried and do not let birds come into direct contact with any disinfectants. With food items ensure that only fresh seed and items are used and correctly stored in suitable

containers to prevent any possible contamination. You should also ensure that there is no possibility of mice or rats coming into contact with seed etc.

Overcrowding, lack of ventilation and failure to quarantine newly acquired birds are other sources of problems. All new birds should be quarantined separately for at least four weeks. They should also be fed, treated etc. last to reduce the risk of passing any possible disease to the rest of your birds. Another precaution is to ensure you wash your hands thoroughly before and after dealing with them. Although the birds you have purchased may seem perfectly well there is no way of telling if they are carriers or have something in the early stages possibly triggered by the stress of being caught up and transferred to a new environment.

Stress is a condition in a bird that dramatically reduces their body's normal resistance to disease, although there may be no obvious outward signs of any particular disease. The bird may suffer loss of appetite making it more susceptible to infection. Initially new birds should be given the same type of food they have been accustomed to, with any changes in diet being made gradually. Although birds in quarantine should have as much peace and quiet as possible, they should be checked daily to ensure that they remain healthy, look fit and are not fluffed up.

It is essential to check all your birds daily for any possible signs of illness or that things are not quite right, such as puffed up feathers, partially opened eyes, and labored, irregular breathing. If the bird is at a more acute stage it may no longer sit upright on the perch but will assume a more horizontal position with its tail drooping downwards or sit weakly on the floor.

If you are not sure if your bird is suffering from a disease seek advice from a more experienced bird keeper initially or an avian vet.

Speed is of the essence when dealing with a sick bird. Do not delay – if you spot an ill bird in the morning don't think that you can leave the bird until later in the day when you are not in a hurry. By their very nature birds will try to hide their illness for as long as possible – within the wild a bird that appears to be visually ill is an instant target for predators. When you first spot the bird, possibly huddled up in a corner of the aviary, it may have been ill for several days.

Simply catching the sick bird can cause more stress, so ensure that you have a cage ready to receive the bird. Try not to chase the bird around the aviary. Never try to treat the bird in the aviary (unless it is the only occupant). A sick bird may be infectious and care should be taken to ensure the remaining birds in the flight do not contract the same illness.

Some bird keepers like to use infrared lamps, hung on the front of the cage. By placing one perch in front of the lamp and another away from the lamp, the sick bird will be able to move away from the lamp when it does not need it. Food and water will need to be changed more regularly because the heat given off by the lamp will dry the food and water out quite quickly.

Always ensure that when the bird is in a "hospital cage" the food and water is not placed under any perches, so the bird cannot defecate into its dishes.

Disinfect all dishes and drinkers regular - some sterilising solutions used for baby bottles are best to clean the dishes every day.

Some problems are common to all types of birds, irrespective of species :

### ***First Aid***

If a bird becomes unwell, the main things it needs immediately are warmth, quiet and fluids as well as its usual seed diet. Placing it in a small cage in a warm place will provide the first two and water with a little glucose dissolved in it should be administered. A little softfood mixed with water which has had a teaspoon of honey dissolved in it may also prove beneficial in perking up a run-down bird.

### ***Enteritis***

Stomach upsets are the most common form of illness in birds. The appearance of the bird and its droppings are both signs that it is suffering from enteritis. A slight case will see a bird sitting quietly, feathers fluffed up rather than smooth, sleeping more than usual with its head under its wing and its droppings will be green rather than the normal black and white. In a severe case the fluffing up will be to the point where the bird's head seems to be withdrawn into its body and its eyes will be closed. The bird's droppings will be coating its vent and tail.

The first step in treating any case of stomach upset is to move the bird to a warm place and remove any food other than the seed mixture. Green food is often the cause of enteritis, particularly if it is stale, dirty, wet or has been subject to frost. So make sure that your bird eats no green food while it is ill. Even when your bird is well all green food should be taken from the cage at the end of each day so that it cannot be eaten when it is stale. Pet shops sell medicines which can be put in a bird's drinking water. In slight cases of stomach upsets, one of these can be tried for a couple of days.

Sometimes the use of a Probiotic may be beneficial. Probiotics are cultures of harmless bacteria that are normally present in the birds gut; the idea is that

these will help restore the correct balance by overwhelming the germs that are causing the problem, restoring a healthy gut. If the bird gets no better then you should consult a vet. In serious cases it is best to speak to a vet straight away.

Remember that the large, wet droppings produced by breeding hens are normal and should not be confused with diarrhea.

### ***Sickness***

Sickness, like enteritis, is caused by a stomach upset but results in a bird bringing up the contents of its stomach through the beak. This clings, in a sticky mess, to the face and head of the bird. Because it is a stomach upset, treatment begins as it did for enteritis. Keep the bird warm and take away all food except the seed. Make sure that the bird has no green food to eat. Try a medicine, from a pet shop, at first, but if the bird is no better after a couple of days consult a vet. If, at any stage, the bird becomes more ill, speak to a vet at once.

### ***Moult***

Moulting cannot be called an illness. The moult, or changing of the birds feathers is a natural occurrence and normally problem free. During the moult the birds spend a lot of time resting, and they become quieter; the whole process can take several weeks. For a successful moult, birds must have available a continuous source of protein rich food, any deficiency or shortage in the supply can lead to the formation of fault bars in the feathers, causing a weak spot which may later break, or cause permanent damage to the flight feathers until they are replaced at the next moult.

Occasionally problems may occur that cause what is referred to as an abnormal moult; this can be caused by a sudden shock or fright, disease, and extremes of temperature. A further cause of abnormal moult can be from a malfunction of the bird's thyroid gland.

### ***Feather Plucking***

There are two types of feather plucking. The plucking of other birds' feathers – usually a mother pulling the feathers out of her chicks – and cases of a bird plucking their own feathers. Birds in flights will often swing by the beak from other birds' tails resulting in the tails coming out. This is not feather plucking, it is birds at play.

Hens in nest boxes sometimes start pulling out feathers from their chicks' heads. What starts as a show of affection can become more serious when a hen wants the chicks to leave the nest so that she can lay another clutch of eggs. A cream can be bought, to be rubbed on the chicks' heads, which helps to stop the hen plucking and moving the chicks out of the box, on to the cage floor, can

help. Feathers plucked from the head usually grow back in. Those taken from the wings often grow in unevenly. Hens which feather pluck should not be used for breeding again; nor should the young hens bred from them. Many people think that feather plucking is an inherited habit. When a bird starts to pull out its own feathers it is almost certainly due to one of two causes; a feather mite or stress.

No matter what the cause it pays to treat for mite. Pet shops sell powders and sprays which can be used both on birds and equipment. If the cause is a mite it can be cured quickly in this way. Stress is more difficult. If a bird becomes so bored that it sits and pulls out its own feathers you must find a way of keeping it occupied. Toys of all sorts can be bought at pet shops. Try one at a time to see if you can find what sort of plaything your pet likes. A mirror works well, as it makes the bird think that there is another bird in its cage. Changing the position of the cage can help, even to the point of moving it to another room where the bird will get more company. When a bird is left alone during the day, leave a radio playing quietly to keep it company. As a last resort, buy a second bird, but it is possible that they will not get on together and there is a good chance that the arrival of another bird will stop your pet from talking.

### ***Scaly Face***

A bird which has white scaly masses around the beak, eyelids and sometimes legs is most probably suffering from Scaly Face. This is caused by a mite which burrows below the surface. It can be cured in a few days by applying one of the proprietary brands of scaly face creams or lotions available from the pet shop or your local vet. The cage and its contents should also be washed and disinfected.

### ***Claws and Beaks***

Sometimes a bird's beak or claws can become overgrown. Cuttlefish bone and iodine nibbles help to keep beaks trimmed. Some pet shops sell perches with sandpaper fixed to the underside. These can help to keep the claws the correct length.

#### ***Claws***

Excessive claw length can cause problems for birds, such as getting caught up on everything in their cage/flight, leading to possible loss of the nail, claw, broken limbs or even death. It is quite easy to trim a bird's claw. Take the bird in the hand with its back lying in the palm, then take the leg, near the foot, between your middle finger and thumb. It is then quite easy to control the foot while you are cutting the nails with a small pair of nail clippers in the other hand. Care must be taken not to cut into the quick or blood vessel in the claw. In the light this can be seen quite easily as a dark line running through the horny part of the claw, cut no closer than 3mm ( $\frac{1}{8}$  inch) to this. If the blood vessel is accidentally damaged, use a Styptic pencil or dip a paper tissue into

some wet potassium permanganate crystals and dab the tissue onto the bleeding part, this should stop the bleeding. These crystals can be obtained from a pharmacy.

### *Beaks*

A beak that has grown out of shape needs to be trimmed back to its normal shape. Using a small pair of nail clippers, hold the bird with its back in the palm of your hand and restrain its head gently but firmly between your forefinger and thumb. Taking care not to cut into the blood vessels, carefully trim the beak back to shape. If you are not sure about how to carry this out get an experienced bird keeper to show you.

### *Egg Binding*

Egg binding is not a disease; it is a symptom that something is amiss with the husbandry or diet. If birds are housed and fed correctly, under normal circumstances egg binding should rarely occur.

Before breeding any bird ensure they are the right age, and have been brought into breeding condition with a balanced diet and adequate calcium in the form of mineralised tonic grit etc.

All hens become swollen under the vent when they are laying and this should not be confused with egg binding. If a hen looks bright and alert it is not egg bound. An egg bound hen looks fluffed up and unwell; often sitting on the floor of the cage. The bird may also move its tail up and down frequently. Keeping the hen warm is often all that is required for it to pass an egg. A little olive oil brushed on to the vent opening helps. As a last resort the hen can be held over a cup of hot water so that the steam can relax the vent. Be very careful not to let the hen be scalded. If possible, the advice of an experienced breeder should be sought. Do not be tempted to try and help the egg out.

Once she has passed the egg, the hen may appear to be perfectly all right, however she should not be allowed to breed again until she has been rested and the diet or cause of the problem rectified.

### *Eye Inflammation*

The most common cause of this is a minute feather growing from the eyelid, touching the eye and causing irritation. This is usually compounded by the bird rubbing the eye on the perch. Remove the perches for a couple of days and try removing the feather with a pair of tweezers. If no feather is present on examination, it is possible that an infection is present. Bathe the eye in warm water and use an eye ointment, available from pet shops or your local vet.

### *Sore Feet*

To avoid sore feet perches should be regularly washed and bathing facilities should be offered on a regular basis to allow the feet to be kept clean. If a bird has sore feet, remove the perches from the cage and, using cotton wool, bathe

the affected area with a weak solution of disinfectant and warm water every day until clear, then refit the perches.

### ***Mites***

The main types of mites that affect birds are the feather mite, which feeds on skin and feather debris and can cause irritation that leads to feather plucking. The best therapy against feather mites is good hygiene. Keep cages as clean as possible, and allow the birds sufficient bathing facilities or give them a fine spray regularly. The other mite that can cause problems is the Red mite. This does not live on the bird itself but spends the daylight hours hiding in cracks and crevices around the birdroom, cages or aviary, coming out during the hours of darkness to feed on the birds blood. Although a single mite itself does not take a large amount of blood, if present in large numbers they can spread disease, cause anemia, and even death.

Nesting birds and their young are particularly at risk. The mites may be visible as dark specks around the sides and top of the nest box, where they thrive. If you suspect that mites may be present, initially spray the birds and their accommodation with one of the pyrethrin based anti-mite sprays. This is a natural based product derived from the pyrethrum flower and is harmless to birds. Then hang a suitable size insect strip in the bird room. This should keep it mite free if renewed as recommended.

### ***Injuries***

Injuries, such as broken legs and wings, should be treated as quickly as possible by a vet.

### ***Using Antibiotics***

Antibiotics are preferable to the Sulpha drugs as the latter are dangerous unless administered completely accurately, and for a very limited period of treatment. When using any form of antibiotics obtained via your vet, ensure that you follow the instructions carefully and complete the course recommended. There are several methods by which the antibiotic may be administered, these include: a) in the water b) in the food c) orally d) injections (vet only) e) topical medication (applied to skin etc) f) nebulization (machine causes fogging of antibiotics that can be inhaled). Once the bird has been cured of its ailment it is recommended that they are treated with a course of Probiotics.

### ***Probiotics***

Probiotics are a mixture of essential amino acids, vitamins and the beneficial micro organisms found in the healthy birds gut. Antibiotics when used often kill off all of the "good bugs" as well as the targeted "bad bugs" found in the gut. Probiotics are a good way of putting the "good bugs" back into the intestines. Probiotics are available either as a powder ready to be mixed or in



solution. Care should be taken to give your birds the correct dose at the correct period (once a week, once every three days etc).

Never be afraid to ask the advice of an experienced breeder if you are worried that your bird may be ill. When giving medicine in the drinking water always make sure that the dose is that stated on the bottle and take away other drinking water.

## **BUDGERIGARS**

Budgerigars are hardy birds which can stand a wide range of conditions without becoming ill. Some item of food, causing a stomach upset, or being placed in a draught, bringing on a cold, are the most usual causes of illness. They are naturally bright, active birds and so the first sign of illness can be that they sleep longer than is usual. A small change to the diet or position of the cage at this stage can stop the illness going any further. But if your budgerigar reaches the stage where it is huddled up on the floor of the cage it is time to get the advice of a vet.

You should not make the mistake of mixing up sickness with breeding fitness in cock budgerigars. Cock budgerigars feed their mates when they are ready to breed. They bring up pieces of seed and, if there is not a hen in the cage, will try to feed them to a mirror or other toy. This is called "Regurgitation". When a bird is sick, the food it brings up is wet and sometimes has an unpleasant smell.

One problem that is specific to Budgerigars is *French Mould*.

If you have a young budgerigar which has lost all, or most, of its large wing and tail feathers it could well be suffering from French Mould. If you look closely at the quill in the centre of a French Moulder's large feathers you will see dried blood inside the quill. Although there are many theories, no-one really knows what causes French Mould. The birds themselves do not seem to suffer at all and run and climb instead of flying. Because they cannot fly, French Moulters often make good pets and many recover their feathers when they moult into adult plumage.

## **COCKATIELS**

Most illness, caused by respiratory or intestinal upset, can be cured by the application of antibiotics or antitoxins. The safety first rule is to isolate the bird, if it shares accommodation with other birds, keep it warm and under constant observation. Glucose in warm water helps to reduce stress induced by sickness.

Many cockatiels are lost, not so much by the illness itself, but by stress related to it. A cockatiel showing no interest in perching, huddled up in a corner and not eating or drinking, requires immediate treatment.

Your local vet (avian qualified or not) should be willing to administer 2.5 volume Baytril, an antibiotic, as a first course of treatment. The bird might require further dosage before full recovery is established. As a process of elimination, viral, toxic or bacterial causes should also be considered. The amount of accuracy of any information relating to the bird's diet, changes in behaviour etc. will assist the vet in determining which course of treatment is best to prescribe.

## **FOREIGN FINCHES**

Finches are relatively small birds, which results in a high metabolism. This means that they have to keep eating continually as they use up energy rapidly. This is why their health deteriorates so quickly if they become ill.

Also, because of their small size finches need warmth if they are to recover from illness. You can use specially designed hospital cages, or a clip-on infrared lamp. This avoids the added stress to the bird of having to be caught up and transferred to the cage. However, if the bird is in a flight with others this may have to be done, depending on the nature of the suspected illness. The lamp can be attached to the front of the cage adjacent to the perch. This allows the bird to move closer to the heat source when it needs to.

## **FOREIGN SOFTBILLS**

Softbills like all other species of birds do suffer from certain ailments and it should be remembered that it is easier to ensure that the birds do not fall ill rather than try to cure the bird.

Diet, clean drinking water and bathing water as well as a stress free environment are essential for the good health of all birds; but sooner or later you will encounter a bird with an illness.

The following lists of diseases associated with softbills covers the most common. There are many bacterial diseases and nutritional problems that this fact sheet is unable to cover. If in doubt seek medical advice from your vet.

### ***Candida***

Nectar feeders and Lorries can especially suffer from a fungus growth within the beak. In appearance it has often been described as "cottage cheese fungus". The

fungus (*Candida albicans*) is a form of yeast and will affect the mouth and the upper digestive tract. The fungus can be caused several ways—malnutrition, a lack of Vitamin A, prolonged use of antibiotics or simply too much sugar used within the nectar. This condition is quite easily treated by using an oral suspension of *Nystatin* for several days. The easiest way of apply the *Nystatin* is painting it on the affected area using a small artists paintbrush. A veterinarian will be able to provide you with the *Nystatin* solution.

### ***Aspergillosis***

Poor ventilation within the aviary, damp conditions, old food, droppings etc. will all encourage growth of molds—*Aspergillus fumigatus* is one such mold. It is a fungus that can affect the lower respiratory tract of your bird. If you suspect that a bird has the disease but there are no visual signs, make the bird fly from one end of the flight to the other and then back again. Watch their breathing closely when they land on a perch. Affected birds will exhibit signs such as open mouthed and noisy breathing, or a shortness of breath. This condition should be treated by your vet.

### ***Botulism***

Now because fewer breeders decide **not to use** maggots to feed their softbills, botulism is not as prevalent as it once was. Maggots should be thoroughly purged before being fed to softbills. The small black spot that can be easily seen in the body of the maggot must be removed. Botulism is a bacterium that produces a toxin, which affects the bird's nervous system. Affected birds become paralysed and cannot move their wings or legs properly. Seek veterinary assistance.

### ***Bumble foot***

This is a condition that can easily be avoided. Quite often it is caused by an infection from an injury to the foot. The joints around the foot will become inflamed and swell. Uniform perches are often to blame or unsuitable surfaces (concrete, surfaces heavily contaminated with faeces). Use perches that are of different diameters in the aviary. This will help to exercise the foot properly when the birds fly from perch to perch.

The abscesses may need to be lanced and the infected area removed, this should only be performed by a vet.

### ***Pseudotuberculosis (Yersiniosis)***

This disease is associated with and spread by mice and rats as they urinate over the food dishes and the floor of the aviary. The symptoms of the disease include the bird looking poorly for a day or so, severe weight loss and then death. An autopsy performed on the bird should show a damaged liver similar to that associated with Tuberculosis. Detection of this disease is difficult. Affected

birds if caught quickly enough can be treated with antibiotics although a return to full health is most unlikely.

### ***Salmonella***

Birds suffering from salmonella look depressed, listless, sit in the corner of the aviary fluffed-up and will also have diarrhoea. Newly imported birds are often affected, as the conditions they have been kept in before transportation may not have been hygienic. Hygiene is the key to keeping salmonella at bay. This disease is often associated with faeces, a moist environment or simply rotting food. Seek veterinary assistance.

### ***Mites and Lice***

Mostly associated with finches and parrotlike birds, softbills can suffer from the problem as well. Mites can basically be divided into three groups.

**a) Feather mite and lice** are external parasites that cause irritation, scaling and feather plucking on their hosts. Pyrethrins are the best form of treatment, supplied as a powder; they can be applied over the affected area on the bird. The head and face should be protected at all times to avoid inhalation of the powder and possible respiratory problems.

**b) Red mite** – are slightly different in that they can live away from the bird. They come out at night, suck blood from the host bird and then return to crevices, nest boxes, under drinkers etc to rest and reproduce. They can cause severe anaemia and even death. There are many sprays on the market that kill red mite. Always ensure that the birds are not in the area to be sprayed. Ensure that all crevices, corners and perches are thoroughly sprayed to kill the red mites off.

**c) Air-Sac Mites** – this is a most distressing disease for the bird. Symptoms of the ailment are most noticeable when the bird starts to wheeze whilst breathing. The bird may also fight to take a breath and leave the beak open gapping. Other symptoms include the bird coughing and appearing listless. In severe cases the bird will become exhausted quickly and not move from its perch but will be constantly wiping its beak. The disease is caused by a micro organism that will attack the windpipe, lungs and then finally the abdomen. Infected birds should be isolated immediately – veterinary advice should be sought. There are several drugs available that should help to relieve the symptoms and possibly cure the bird.

### ***Conjunctivitis***

The infectious form of this ailment can occur usually when the birds are run down or possibly suffering from a deficiency in their diet. The birds will blink more often and repeatedly run the affected eye on a perch. Sometime a slight watery discharge can also be noticed. Eventually the eye and surrounding tissue may appear swollen and the bird may become more distressed. In the non-

infectious form of conjunctivitis the bird may have simply picked up something in the eye such as a seed husk or smaller dust particle. Both forms of the eye infection can be cured by the use of Chloramycetin antibiotic eye ointment. The bird should be isolated so that it may be treated easier. All perches within the aviary must either be replaced or thoroughly disinfected. You should wash your hands thoroughly after handling any birds with conjunctivitis as there may be a chance of cross infection.

### ***Going Light***

This is a term given to birds that are often seen continuously eating but losing weight dramatically. There is not a great deal that can be done for an infected bird. Very little is known about the causes of the problem. Affected birds are usually in a bad way by the time the condition is noticed, and death is almost certain.





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