

Be Afraid.....Be Very Afraid

Peter S. Sakas DVM

Niles Animal Hospital and Bird Medical Center

7278 N. Milwaukee Ave. Niles, IL 60714

847-647-9325 FAX 847-647-8498

Introduction

Pet birds are totally reliant upon our level of care for their very existence. The fate of these companion animals are in our hands. Poor husbandry techniques, poor diet, inadequate care are all factors that can lead to sickness, poor quality of life and even untimely death.

When you make the commitment to keep birds as companion animals you must dedicate yourself to maintain them in a proper fashion. Too often, due to negligence or ignorance birds are subjected to injury, illness or death due to poor husbandry techniques.

Nutrition

Malnutrition due to improper diet is probably the number one “disease” condition that we see in avian practice. Poor diet can lead to metabolic conditions and lowered resistance to disease. Nutritional conditions we see include obesity, fatty liver disease, vitamin A deficiency, atherosclerosis, and poor feather quality.

Our responsibility is to provide a complete and balanced diet. Pellets are an ideal diet and should make up 80 to 50% of the diet. People food, including some seed, can make up to 20 to 50% of the diet as well. The conversion process to a pelleted diet must be done carefully as some birds do not willingly change over. They must be monitored carefully during the change to pellets.

If the bird refuses to convert and remains on a seed diet it must be supplemented as a seed diet is inadequate. Supplements should include a quality daily vitamin, mineral sources, and vitamin A rich foods (red and orange vegetables / dark green leafy vegetables).

Sanitation

Birds kept in filthy conditions are prone to picking up disease. Cage papers should be checked and changed daily. If wood chips, shavings, corn cob or similar substrates are used they should be changed regularly. Regular cage cleanings should be performed.

Dirty food and water cups are a prime source of infection for pet birds. Cups should be thoroughly cleaned daily. Cups should be covered or placed strategically to avoid fecal contamination.

The surrounding environment should be thoroughly cleaned regularly as well. Feathers, powder, feces, food all will be potential sources of irritation or infection.

Aspergillus is a ubiquitous soil fungus that can lead to serious disease in pet birds. It can be found in a dusty, musty environment or improperly stored food materials. It can lead to respiratory disease or manifest itself as a skin irritation leading to feather picking.

Bird keeper's lung (Hypersensitivity Pneumonitis) is human health hazard (zoonosis) caused by hypersensitivity of certain individuals to aerosolized fecal proteins. It can lead to irreversible fibrosis of the lungs. It is important to clean the cage regularly to prevent the drying of the feces and potential aerosolization. Having an air cleaner near the birds is a good idea to keep feather dust, debris, and the fecal material to a minimum. If you do have sensitivity to birds have someone else in the family clean the cages or if you must clean wear a mask.

Cage/Cage Environment

The cage should be proper for the type of bird housed there and made of non-toxic components. Be cautious with objects that may contain lead or zinc (common toxicoses seen with pet birds). Watch for wear and tear of the cage as parts may become damaged and pose a hazard. The cage should be placed in an area free from cold steady “drafts” and sites with potential for exposure to fumes or gases.

The kitchen is one of the worst places to place a bird cage. Dangers include natural gas (stove or water heater), carbon monoxide, overheated or burning food, overheated PTFE, cleaning agents, and aerosols.

Trauma

Birds that fly free are at great risk to be severely injured. Mirrors, windows, ceiling fans, and other objects can be dangerous to free-flying birds.

Closely monitor birds in households with other pets. Cats, ferrets, dogs, and other birds have caused severe and sometimes fatal injuries to birds that are not properly monitored.

Disease Conditions

Birds can suffer from all kinds of disease conditions including bacterial, fungal, viral, chlamydial infections, metabolic disease, reproductive/endocrine disorders, cancer, and psychological conditions. Early detection is the key. Be alert so the signs of disease can be recognized before they lead to a severe condition. Develop a feel for what is normal for your bird and watch for changes from the norm may serve as an indication of disease. Check the droppings daily as droppings are an excellent indicator of potential disease conditions

Feather Picking

Feather picking/self mutilation is one of the most frustrating conditions faced by avian veterinarians as there are a multitude of possible causes. Infection, hormonal conditions, psychological issues, allergies, metabolic disease, are potential causes to name a few. As there are so many causes there is no one good, all encompassing solution.

Purchasing a Bird

When purchasing a bird, deal with quality sources. If it is too good to be true it probably is! Always obtain a written guarantee and honor the requirements. Have the bird checked by an avian veterinarian within the guarantee period. Always pay attention to what the breeder/pet store tells you about the bird and follow the instructions carefully.

Isolation

Lack of an isolation period after the purchase of a new bird is one of the worst sins I see committed by people who have other birds in their home/aviary....EVEN BY PEOPLE WHO SHOULD KNOW BETTER!!!!!!!

The isolation period should be a minimum of 30 days, some sources advocate 90 days. New birds can be carrying a variety of disease conditions that can cause severe disease in your other birds. Not only large birds should be isolated as serious disease has been detected in small birds as well. For example, there have been recent cases of psittacosis in cockatiels, as well as psittacine beak and feather disease in budgies and lovebirds.

With no isolation precautions you are exposing your birds to all the diseases that exist in the pet store or breeding facility.

Conclusion

There are many disease conditions and hazards lurking out there to put your bird at risk. Your responsibility is to protect your bird from such hazards by proper husbandry techniques and recognition of disease conditions. We want our avian companions to live the long quality life they deserve.