

VETERINARY CARE FOR YOUR PET BIRD

INTRODUCTION

Pet birds need regular medical care just as dogs, cats, and people do. Unlike dogs and cats, however, birds tend to hide signs of illness until they are very sick. This makes the need for routine preventative veterinary care especially important for pet birds.

Have you recently acquired a new pet bird, or are you considering doing so? Now is the time to locate an experienced avian (bird) veterinarian in your area. The Association of Avian Veterinarians' website is a great place to start. Visit www.aav.org and follow the links to "Find A Vet." Here you will find all the veterinarians in your area with a special interest in birds. Other good ways to find a bird veterinarian are to check with local bird clubs, your closest veterinary school, or with other local veterinarians.

New Bird Examination

The Association of Avian Veterinarians recommends that all newly acquired birds receive a prompt medical examination. Many serious and even contagious diseases are not visually evident in birds. If your new pet does turn out to be harboring an infection or is otherwise ill, the likelihood of an accurate diagnosis and successful treatment is enhanced by early detection. Ensuring that your new pet has a clean bill of health puts you both on the path toward a long and beautiful friendship.

New Bird Quarantine

If you have other birds at home, do not bring a new bird into the flock without quarantining it first. Isolation and quarantine of a new bird, even those that appear healthy, is the most important thing an owner can do to protect other birds on the premises. It is advised that all newly acquired birds be maintained separately for a period of at least six weeks following purchase. Make sure not to let the birds share dishes or perches during this time, and wash your hands after handling your birds or cleaning their cages. Many airborne viruses can be spread from room to room by central air conditioning or heating systems, so keep your new bird in a separate air space if possible. During quarantine observe your new bird carefully, and seek veterinary care if any abnormalities are noted.

Components of an Avian Examination

History

Your veterinarian and his or her staff will ask you questions about your bird and the reason for your visit. You will be asked where and when your bird was obtained, as well as your bird's age and gender (if known), diet and supplements, caging and environment (photos are helpful), previous health problems, and recent exposure to other birds. If your bird is sick or injured, your veterinarian will want to know what symptoms you are observing and how long ago they began. If you are seeing a new veterinarian for the first time it is a good idea to bring any previous medical records, medications, and radiographs you may have.

Initial Evaluation

Your bird will first be observed in its travel enclosure. Your bird should be alert and fully aware of its surroundings. If your bird is staying fluffed or keeping its eyes closed when stimulated, this is a warning sign that your bird may be sick. Other important clues to serious health problems include difficulty breathing, loss of voice, generalized weakness, and lameness.

Handling and Restraint

Most, but not all, birds will need to be physically restrained for examination. There are a variety of handling and restraint methods that your avian veterinarian will be familiar with, all of which aim to allow for a full examination with a minimum amount of stress to your pet. Restraint methods are adjusted to meet the needs of the individual bird and circumstances. Comfort, minimal fear, and no pain are the common goals, as they would be for ourselves in our own physician's office. There are resources available to help you train your bird to be calm and unafraid during the veterinary exam. Your veterinarian can guide you to options, principles and some specific methods that may best apply to you and your bird, should this be appropriate.

Physical Examination

During the physical examination your bird will be weighed using a digital scale and then be carefully examined from beak to toe. Your veterinarian will evaluate your bird's eyes, ears, nares (nostrils), beak, oral cavity, choana (slit on the roof of the mouth), neck, crop, pectoral muscles, wings, plumage, belly, vent, legs, feet, spine, and preen gland (if present). The heart, lungs, and air sacs will be assessed by auscultation with a stethoscope. If a band number or microchip is present, it will be recorded in the medical record.



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Diagnostics

Depending on your bird's species, age, gender, history, and examination findings, your veterinarian may suggest one or more of the following diagnostic tests to further evaluate your bird's health:

Bloodwork (Complete Blood Count and Biochemistry Panel)

Your veterinarian may recommend bloodwork to evaluate the overall health status of your bird. One common blood test is the Complete Blood Count (CBC), which evaluates the quantity and appearance of red blood cells, white blood cells, and thrombocytes (platelets). This test is used to detect anemia and evidence of systemic infection or inflammation. Another common blood test is the Biochemistry Panel (Chem), which assesses your bird's kidney function, liver function, blood glucose, blood proteins, calcium, and electrolytes.

Fecal Diagnostics

Analysis of your bird's droppings can provide many clues to your bird's health. Droppings will be visually assessed for abnormalities in volume, color, and consistency, as well as for evidence of blood or undigested food. Feces can be further evaluated for parasites, abnormal yeast, and abnormal bacteria using diagnostics such as wet mount evaluation, flotation, Gram stain, and cytology.

Chlamydiosis Testing

Several screening tests are available for the detection of avian chlamydiosis. The causative agent of this bacterial disease, *Chlamydia psittaci*, is infectious to both birds and people. In people the disease is called psittacosis and can cause an atypical pneumonia among other symptoms. Although there is no evidence of increased disease risk to infants, the elderly, or those with compromised immune systems, thorough diagnostic testing should be considered for birds in contact with these individuals. Some birds with *Chlamydia* infections become quite ill, while others can carry the disease without exhibiting symptoms. For more information, see the AAV handout entitled "Avian Chlamydiosis and Psittacosis."

Gender Determination

Most parrot species are sexually monomorphic, meaning that the males and females look alike. For these species, gender can be determined by sending a few drops of blood to a laboratory. Knowing whether your bird is male or female is important not only for medical reasons but for behavioral ones as well.

Microbiology (Gram stains, Bacterial and Fungal Cultures)

If your bird is ill, your veterinarian may recommend a Gram stain and/or culture of the choana (roof of the mouth), cloaca (vent), wound, or other site to look for bacterial or yeast infections. If abnormal organisms are cultured, further testing is done to determine which medications will be most effective against the infection.

Viral Screening

Pet birds are susceptible to several contagious viral diseases, including Polyomavirus and Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease. Your veterinarian may recommend testing for one or more of these diseases if your bird has suggestive clinical signs or test results. Testing may also be recommended when adding a new bird to an established flock.

Radiographs (X-Rays)

If your bird is sick or injured, your veterinarian may recommend that radiographs (x-rays) be taken to evaluate the areas of concern. Radiographs allow your veterinarian to examine your bird's airways, internal organs, and skeletal structures. Depending on the area of the body being imaged, your veterinarian may recommend brief sedation or anesthesia so that diagnostic quality images can be obtained without undue stress to your pet.

Vaccinations

Unfortunately, vaccines have not yet been developed against many of the viral diseases birds are susceptible to. There are, however, a few commercially available vaccines that are useful under certain circumstances. Speak with your veterinarian about vaccination and whether it is indicated for your pet bird.



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Annual Checkups

Pet owners who are accustomed to taking their family dog or cat to the veterinarian once a year may not realize that their pet bird needs regular veterinary care too. In fact, having your bird examined regularly is even more important, as symptoms of disease in birds tend to be more subtle and can go easily unnoticed at home.

Avian medicine is a constantly growing, adapting, and evolving field. Annual examinations allow your avian veterinarian to apply these changes to the care of your feathered friend.

AAV: Setting a Standard in Avian Care Since 1980

Avian medicine is a distinct and very specialized field that requires extensive training, advanced skills, and facilities specifically designed and equipped to treat and hospitalize birds. The Association of Avian Veterinarians was established to provide veterinarians with this special education, and to keep them up to date with the latest information on bird health. The AAV holds an annual conference on avian medicine and publishes the peer-reviewed *Journal of Avian Medicine and Surgery*. AAV also makes annual contributions toward avian conservation and sponsors studies advancing the understanding of avian medicine.



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For More Information

For more information on birds, ask your veterinarian for copies of the following AAV Client Education Brochures:

- Avian Chlamydiosis and Psittacosis
- Veterinary Care for Your Pet Bird*
- Basic Care for Companion Birds*
- Behavior: Normal and Abnormal
- Caring for Backyard Chickens
- Digital Scales
- Feather Loss
- Feeding Birds
- Injury Prevention and Emergency Care
- Managing Chronic Egg-laying in Your Pet Bird
- Signs of Illness in Companion Birds*
- Ultraviolet Lighting for Companion Birds
- When Should I Take My Bird to a Veterinarian?*
- Zoonotic Diseases in Backyard Poultry*



Scan to view these handouts and more on AAV's Bird Owner Resources page!

**Available in multiple languages. All others are available in English only at this time.*

Online Resources

Follow AAV on Facebook (www.facebook.com/aavonline) for great tips and the latest news for pet bird owners. You can also find us on Instagram (@aavonline) and YouTube!

Our website, www.aav.org, offers a Find-a-Vet tool to help pet bird owners locate avian veterinarians around the world. We also offer a variety of resources such as basic bird care instructions and more. Visit the website today!

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Association of Avian Veterinarians
PO Box 9, Teaneck, NJ 07666