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RESPIRATORY DISEASE

General Information

Respiratory diseases are among the most common problems seen in all species of pet birds. Because they can have a variety of causes, early diagnosis by your veterinarian and proper treatment is necessary to prevent severe illness.

What are some of the causes of respiratory disease in pet birds?

Respiratory problems can be caused by many factors. Feeding an all seed diet is a common problem among many birds with respiratory problems. Because seeds contain very little vitamin A, and because vitamin A is needed for the normal development of epithelium, vitamin A deficiency results in abnormal epithelium, such as that lining the respiratory tract, which is easily infected by microorganisms. Many microorganisms, most commonly bacteria, can infect the respiratory system of birds. However, viruses, fungi, parasites, tumors, mycoplasma, and commonly chlamydia (which causes chlamydiosis in birds) can result in respiratory infections. Sometimes organ failure will result in respiratory signs (difficulty breathing) while not actually causing an infection itself. Rarely, allergies to environmental allergens may also cause signs of respiratory disease such as sneezing in birds. Finally, exposure to environmental toxins such as cigarette smoke and aerosol sprays can cause respiratory disease. Sudden death can occur with exposure to overheated Teflon cookware.



Are certain causes more common in particular species?

Yes, and this is one of the many reasons that it is important to go to a veterinarian knowledgeable in pet bird medicine. For example, budgerigars and cockatiels often have mycoplasma or chlamydia causing their respiratory infections, whereas Amazon parrots may have gram negative bacterial problems, African gray parrots may be infected with Aspergillosis, and finches and canaries may have air sac mites!

Is it true that drafts can cause my bird to catch a cold?

No, that is just a myth. While it is not healthy for a bird to receive constant direct air flow as it would if placed directly beneath an air vent, respiratory disease won't develop just because of a draft.

What are some of the signs of respiratory disease in birds?

Birds can show a variety of clinical signs. For example, some birds with infections of the trachea or lungs and air sacs may show nothing more than a voice change. Some birds with respiratory disease will have

watery eyes; still others will sneeze, wheeze, cough, and have a nasal discharge. Yet other birds will just appear ruffled, fail to perch, and keep their eyes closed. A bird with increased respiratory effort will have a tail bob with each breath.



With all the various causes of respiratory disease, how will my veterinarian accurately diagnose my bird's problem?

The history you provide is very important, as is a thorough physical examination. Otherwise, your veterinarian has many laboratory tests at his or her disposal. Commonly, special tests to detect bacteria called gram stains are performed on a swab of the bird's throat, cloaca and even the bird's droppings. A sinus aspirate or flush may also be performed. Sometimes your veterinarian may choose to culture the bird's respiratory discharges to look for specific

bacteria and yeast. A radiograph (X-ray) of the bird's lungs and air sacs can often reveal diagnostic information. Also since chlamydiosis is often incriminated in respiratory disease in birds, your veterinarian may choose to perform a blood count and test for that infection as well.

Is it possible for me to treat my bird at home with medication sold at the pet store?

Absolutely not! First, how can the pet store clerk who is not a veterinarian and has no medical training correctly diagnose the cause of your bird's problem without even seeing your pet; your veterinarian can't even do that. Second, most of the antibiotics sold at the pet store are ineffective against most of the causes of respiratory disease in birds. If the cause of the respiratory infection is not bacterial in origin, no antibiotic will be effective. To avoid delaying proper diagnosis and treatment of your bird, you should schedule an appointment at the first signs of respiratory problems.

How is respiratory disease treated in birds?

Once the correct diagnosis is made, your veterinarian may suggest a course of antibiotics if the problem is a bacterial infection. Antifungal drugs are used in cases of fungal disease like aspergillosis, and parasites are most commonly treated with oral or injectable antiparasitic drugs. Improper diets are slowly corrected and vitamin supplementation is used if vitamin A deficiency is suspected. Seriously ill birds are hospitalized so that injectable and aerosol medications can be employed, and force feeding and IV fluids can be administered if needed.