

# The Avian First Aid Kit

by Sybil Erden and Carol Highfill

Phoenix, AZ

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One of the most important, yet most often overlooked, items a responsible bird owner must have is a First Aid Kit just for your bird. This is true whether you have one companion bird, or are a breeder caring for a hundred of more avians.

Having a well stocked avian First Aid Kit handy can allow you to handle minor emergencies yourself or enable you to stabilize your bird's condition while getting your bird to your avian veterinarian. In an emergency, a time when you will likely be in a panic, you will not have the time to run around your home getting the necessary materials or equipment, so this kit can be a life saver. Decide before hand where you wish to keep the First Aid Kit. The kitchen, bathroom or the bird room are good locations. Wherever you place it, keep it there.

Have your regular avian veterinarian's name, address and telephone number taped in the lid of the First Aid Kit, along with at least one 24 hour emergency hospital, clinic or doctor's name and number. In an envelope, in the First Aid Kit, you should also keep a copy of your bird's medical records, particularly any chronic diseases or recent injuries/illnesses the bird has been treated for. You will want to take this with you to the doctor or hospital and it may be important in an emergency.

A sturdy, medium sized, plastic or metal tool box makes an ideal avian First Aid Kit. After careful consideration, we have decided to help you put together a very basic kit, containing emergency necessities under the heading "Basic First Aid Kit." For those of you who feel more comfortable doing minor emergency procedures yourself, we will list a few more items under "Additional Supplies." We will end this article with a few additional emergency "must haves" for every bird owner.

## Basic First Aid Kit

There are some absolute "musts" for your kit. The following are items we

suggest for inclusion in a Basic First Aid Kit, and a brief description of their uses. Please keep in mind size appropriateness for your bird or birds. If you have some large and small birds you may need to keep duplicate items in various sizes.

**Towel** - for wrapping and securing your bird.

**Scissors** - larger, for cutting tape, bandages and smaller, to cut off strings which can wrap on birds toes.

**"Quik-stop"** and/or styptic pencil (silver nitrate stick) - to stop bleeding from broken blood feathers or cuts. Avian blood has a different system of clotting agents in comparison to human/ mammal blood. A bird can literally bleed to death from a broken blood feather. Birds, in comparison to their size, lose large quantities of blood from relatively tiny cuts.

**Hemostats** and tweezers - for removing broken blood feathers, and/or splinters.

**Pliers.** needle nose - for pulling blood feathers or unbending chains and quick links which birds are known to injure themselves with.

**Wire cutters** - once again, birds are known to wrap themselves in chain and/or wire.

**Gauze pads** - for covering wounds, burns.

**Cotton balls** - for cleansing

**Q-tips** - for cleaning out small wounds, getting materials out of birds' mouths/ throats.

**Vet wrap** (cut into strips and rolled) - for wrapping broken bones, wings, or binding gauze pads to wounds.

**Micropore tape** (paper surgical tape) - for holding gauze in place.

**Penlight** or small flashlight (a head-mounted light is even better).

**Magnifying glasses** or "jewelers hoop" - especially necessary for those of us at "that certain age"...but since birds are so small and delicate, a pair of magnifying glasses can come in handy for anyone trying to do detail work.

**Sterile water** - for flushing wounds or mixing with food.

**Pedialyte** (or generic equivalent) - for rehydrating a dehydrated bird. Can be mixed with food. Pedialyte contains

sugars and electrolytes which avians quickly lose when dehydrated or sick. Must be discarded within 24 hours of opening since it is a wonderful media for bacteria to grow in. An alternate to Pedialyte such as gastrolyte, Rappolyte powders can be used. These should be mixed with sterile water. Both are available through veterinarians. Pedialyte, however, is readily available at any grocery store in the baby food section.

**Hand feeding formula,** jars of human baby food such as veggies, cereals or squash. - Often sick or injured birds will be too weak to eat on their own for a few days. During this period of time we may find ourselves having to spoon or syringe feed a bird to help keep its strength up.

**Feeding syringes,** spoon with bent up sides to facilitate feeding (for above).

**Pellets/seeds** - If your bird needs to stay at the hospital, they may not have the food your bird is accustomed to. It is a good idea to have several baggies of fresh seed and/or pellets available to take with you.

**Betadyne** or hibitane (chlorhexidine) - non-irritating disinfectants. These are available from your veterinarian.

**Aloe Vera** - for very minor burns. Most creams and lotions are toxic to birds, so please make sure that your get 100% pure Aloe Vera.

## Additional Supplies

For those who are more experienced and/or less squeamish, or who simply live too far to get to the veterinarian quickly, you may want to add:

**Popsicle sticks** - for immobilizing broken legs.

**Ophthalmic ointment** - for scratched eyes, minor conjunctivitis.

**Suturing materials** (surgical needles and thread) - Use only if you know what you are doing, or to save a bird's life. Take bird to veterinarian ASAP.

**Gelfoam** - stops bleeding from flesh wounds. Available from your veterinarian.

**Tegaderm dressing** - helps healing for burns and certain open

wounds. Encourages granulation (healing/scabbing.) Available at any pharmacy.

**Lactated Ringer's** solution - used for I-V rehydrating of dehydrated avians and flushing wounds. (Available from your Veterinarian)

**Syringes** - for injectable medications and irrigation of wounds.

**Oxygen** - this requires a prescription from your vet to be put on file with a local supply house. This is only needed by the most experienced of bird owner/breeders.

### Danger Signals and Emergencies

There are many problems which you should be prepared for. We do not intend to list them all. Any time a bird has any of the following symptoms: stops eating, sits fluffed on the bottom of his cage, is bleeding from mouth or vent, has uncontrollable bleeding, has runny eyes, can't breathe, sneezes with discharge, has diarrhea, has constipation (straining to defecate), has loss of balance, depression, lethargy....do not wait! Take your bird to the veterinarian!

**Bleeding.** Birds do not have much clotting agent in their blood. A broken blood feather, or a minor cut can be life threatening. The blood feather must be removed, or bleeding stopped by use of Quik-stop or a styptic pencil. If bleeding does not abate, apply pressure and rush the bird to the veterinarian.

**Antibiotics.** The question of antibiotics has been raised on many occasions. Should the bird owner administer antibiotics without having the bird seen by a veterinarian? The answer must be a resounding NO! The reason for this is that not every antibiotic can eliminate every bacteria. And, of course, antibiotics do not work on viruses. It is most important that the bird is seen by the veterinarian, that blood work or cultures are done before any antibiotics are given. Most antibiotics need to be taken for specific amounts of time, with varying dosages not only by weight of bird, but by species, since some birds are far more "sensitive" to drugs than others.

Also, most veterinarians will wish to administer an anti-fungal medication along with the antibiotic. Avian internal systems are extraordinarily susceptible to yeast and fungal infections, which can sometimes do more harm than the original bacterial infection!

There are antibiotics available over the counter at pet stores. Do not use them. The most common antibiotic available "over the counter" is tetracycline which is of value in very few, and only very specific, avian illnesses. Tetracycline can cause severe fungal infection if not used with systemic anti-fungal drugs and should be avoided unless under veterinary care!

A sad, true, anecdote about over the counter pet-shop antibiotics:

An elder lady recently told us about a Cockatiel she used to have. One morning it wouldn't eat and was very quiet. Having limited means, rather than calling and going to an avian veterinarian, she went to the pet store where she had purchased the bird. They sold her a package of over the counter antibiotics to "add to the

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water." Within a day or two the bird died.

It is our opinion that reputable pet stores should not sell these drugs.

**Egg binding.** One of the common problems a bird owner may encounter is egg binding. Some female birds, particularly Budgies and Cockatiels, are notorious for laying eggs even if no male is present. And in a breeding pair, the chances of problems are, of course, multiplied. The chances of egg binding is most likely in very young, old, or calcium/ mineral deprived birds. This is a very serious condition which can lead to death. Your female bird should be seen immediately by a veterinarian if she is sitting fluffed up at the bottom of her cage, and/or is straining and/or has a swelling/bulge near her cloaca (vent) which she seems unable to pass. An egg bound up, broken, or going necrotic (rotting) within the bird can lead to peritonitis and will poison the bird's entire system, killing her.

**Bites.** It is not uncommon for large birds to bite smaller birds, or for a jealous mate to either bite his mate or his competitor. Lovebirds, for example, will bite (occasionally removing) the toes of other birds landing on their cages. It is important to take care when introducing birds to one another.

One of the more dangerous bites can be from a larger bird to a smaller bird. Some birds are able to bite the beaks off other birds!

Among smaller birds, where damage isn't as obvious, bird bites can be serious. Even if the bleeding isn't serious or can be stopped, bird bite sites are prone to infection.

After stopping the bleeding, take your bird to your avian veterinarian.

**"Night frights" and injuries caused by fear.** Some birds, especially grass parakeets and Cockatiels are prone to night fright. This occurs when a sudden noise or passing light sets off a flurry of random flying within the aviary or cage. Birds can seriously injure themselves, flying into walls, breaking beaks, wings and causing head trauma.

A bird suffering head trauma should be seen as soon as possible by an

avian veterinarian. Broken wings must be carefully set to ensure there is no loss of mobility after healing. Cracked beaks can usually be mended for a long enough period of time for the beak to grow out past the crack. Sometimes, when the crack needs reinforcement or the break is great, a prosthesis (an artificial beak made out of plastic or Fiberglass) needs to be surgically applied to the remaining portion of beak so that the bird can continue to feed itself during the period of time that the beak grows out.

Please note that some of these same injuries just described are relatively common among young birds just learning to fly.

**Books.** A small Red Cross type first aid booklet may be kept in the avian First Aid Kit. An avian book with descriptions of first aid procedures may be even more handy.

For the novice, a book such as *The Bird Care Book*, Sheldon Gerstenfeld V.M.D., (1981,1989), Addison Wesley Publishers, or *You and Your Pet Bird*, David Alderton, (1992), Alfred A. Knopf, might be helpful. There are some good, some bad books on the market. Look at a lot of books, read a lot of books, make intelligent decisions.

For the more experienced bird owner, a copy of *Avian Medicine; Principles and Applications* by Ritchie, Harrison and Harrison, (1995), Wingers Publishing Inc., which is considered the standard of avian veterinary care, is a "must" for the aviculturist's library.

**Traveling.** Even if you are traveling only an hour away, take your First Aid Kit with you. Bring additional water and food. If you are going on a brief drive and your car breaks down, or worse, you are in an accident, the First Aid Kit and additional supplies may save your bird's life!

#### **Additional "Must Haves"**

A traveling cage or carrier appropriate for the size of bird is necessary. A carrier for your Cockatiel, obviously, will not do for your larger Amazon, so multiple bird families may require several carriers. A sheet or blanket for covering the carrier should be handy.

Covering the carrier minimizes stress on the bird as well as keeps the bird out of drafts.

All bird owners need a brooder (a warm enclosed environment for a sick or injured bird). If you can not go to the expense of a professional hospital brooder, an aquarium with wire lid and heating pad and an aquarium thermometer will do. Line the aquarium with several layers of toweling. Cover that with paper towel (for ease of cleaning). Set  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the aquarium floor over the heating pad set on "low" and, if possible, pre-warm to correct temperature before placing the bird in the brooder. You want part of the aquarium OFF the heating pad, so if the bird feels too warm he has a cooler spot to get to. You will need an accurate thermometer to ascertain the temperature of the brooder. The interior of the aquarium/brooder should be around 95° F. A sick or injured bird cannot maintain its body temperature, so warmth, either to prevent shock, or to maintain a sick bird, is an absolute necessity. Place a small dish of water in a corner of the brooder to help maintain humidity. (Professional quality hospital brooders come with automatic temperature and humidity controls.)

You can cover the top, back and three sides with another sheet or towel, leaving at least part of the front uncovered for observation.

An alternate method of keeping a bird warm is creating a hospital cage. Place your bird in a small cage, covered top, back and sides. Place an infra-red (heating) lamp several feet in front of the cage. You will again need a thermometer to monitor the temperature in the hospital cage. Make sure the cage does not get too warm (over 95° F.), nor should it cool down below 85° F.

We are very sure that we have not covered every possible emergency which will arise. The suggestions we have made are based on our experiences as well as the experiences of other bird owners, bird breeders and avian professionals. We hope that in an emergency, the information we have provided to you is helpful. ➔