

Veterinary Viewpoints

Edited by Amy B. Worell, DVM Dipl. ABVP
West Hills, California

Question # 1: I have a Green-winged Macaw that has a lump on its wing. I took it to the veterinarian and she said it was a feather cyst. She said that it needed surgery. Should I get a second opinion and is there any other way to remove it. Why did it just happen to that one feather?

S. Talbis, Arizona

Answer #1: Feather cysts are common in birds. Certain strains of canaries are very prone to them. The veterinarian you consulted advised you correctly. Surgical removal is appropriate. Isolated feather cysts can result from trauma to the follicle of the feather or the skin in the area of a feather follicle.

*James. M. Harris, DVM
Oakland, CA*

Answer #2: One of the most likely causes of "lumps" on a captive parrot's wing is indeed a feather cyst. Tumors, both benign and malignant, and abscesses also cause lumps and bumps (masses). It is important, therefore, that your veterinarian perform diagnostic tests to determine the cause of the mass. This can be done both

prior, during and after surgery. Techniques include palpation (feel the lump), aspirating the mass, cytology (looking at the mass's contents under a microscope), culture, and histopathology (fixing first before examining under a microscope). If it is indeed a feather cyst, surgery is the best way to remove the mass as it can involve rather invasive techniques where anesthesia and sterility are important. Removal of the mass is important because it can be painful or become infected.

The exact causes of feather cysts are unknown but often it is due to trauma to the feather sheaths (feather chewing, wing flapping against hard objects, pulling out of quills). Sometimes this trauma only affects one feather follicle, hence one feather cyst occurs.

*Kim L. Joyner, DVM, MPVM
Raleigh, NC*

Answer # 3: Feather cysts can be a somewhat frequent occurrence in certain species of birds, including Green-winged Macaws. They may occur within any feather follicle, but they seem to occur most commonly on the wings in macaws. Feather cysts are generally thought to be the result of trauma to the feather follicle or to the

growing feather shaft. What is thought to happen is, that during the growth of a feather inside the follicle, some sort of trauma occurs to one side of the growing feather or follicle. Instead of growing out straight as was intended, the developing feather grows abnormally and ends up in a circle or semi-circle configuration within the follicle sheath. On the outside, what is seen is a lump, which sounds like what you have noticed.

The treatment of choice for a feather follicle cyst is complete surgical incision of the abnormal follicle. Once that feather follicle is removed, the problem can not reoccur as the entire follicle has been removed

A lump could also be a variety of types of growths on your bird. Surgical excision is recommended for many lumps on birds, and a biopsy, to determine what the lump is, should be performed.

*Amy B. Worell, DVM, ABVP-Avian
West Hills, CA*

Question # 2: I have been raising birds for years and have never had the dreaded sour crop. Unfortunately, this season, I have had one macaw, one cockatoo, and two Senegal babies that I was handraising develop the problem and die. I was going to take them to the veterinarian, but I tried baking soda and warm water first, then added mineral oil and turned one of them upside down and squeezed the crop empty. I don't think that I have changed a thing in my normal hand-feeding routine. I have not had a dead baby in years. Please help and tell me what I did wrong. Why did this happen to me?

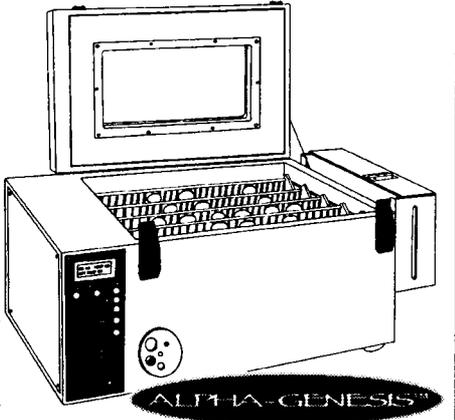
M. Little, Kansas

Answer #1: The term "sour crop" is a catch-all phrase that means the crop fails to empty or has delayed emptying. Anytime this occurs, the food contents do gain a sour smell. Causes of crop stasis are many and are not confined to problems of the crop or gastrointestinal tract. Your birds could have died from any number of causes, some of which can be quite deadly to your existing collection. It is best to

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have all birds necropsied and have histopathology performed on the tissues. This is a good way to arrive at a diagnosis, which you definitely need as more than one bird was affected (and more could die!). But don't wait for another bird to die. Have your avian veterinarian test your birds for diseases that affect more than one bird.

Your avian veterinarian can also guide you as to proper treatment. The first step to any treatment plan is to know what disease you are treating. Trying to fix "sour crop" in a baby bird is like taking aspirin for pneumonia. You might feel better and be able to eat, but the pneumonia could still kill you. After your veterinarian runs diagnostic tests on any sick birds, he or she can tell you what treatments are necessary. Although many people are successful with inverting a baby to empty its crop, it still remains a dangerous procedure. Babies can aspirate and either die acutely or later from pneumonia. Mineral oil can be especially deadly if aspirated. Placing foreign liquids in the crop can further upset the crop, therefore crop cleansing is often restricted to the use of physiologic saline.

No one can tell you better than your avian veterinarian why this problem happened. After careful questioning by your veterinarian and then following a logical diagnostic and treatment plan, you should get your answers. Good luck!

Kim L. Joyner, DVM, MPVM
Raleigh, NC

Answer #2: Sour crop, a fermentation of food in the crop resulting in sour odor, is the result of stasis slowing of the passage of food through the digestive tract. There are many causes of stasis: foreign bodies, infections that can be both bacterial and yeast, poor management, improper diet, and dehydration, to name a few. You need to consult with an avian veterinarian and first evaluate your nursery procedures and methods of sanitation, then evaluate the specific birds involved.

James M. Harris, DVM
Oakland, CA

Answer #3: The term "sour crop" is a lay term that has evolved to indicate a baby's crop that is not emptying. Many of these non-emptying food-filled crops will develop a sour smell, and hence the evolution of the term "sour crop." The term itself is rather misleading as the result is a non-emptying crop but the cause is not necessarily the crop itself.

A non-emptying crop in a baby bird, or a bird of any age actually, can be due to a large variety of problems. Some of these may specifically involve the crop and many do not. Systemic (involves the whole body) illnesses, temperature and humidity problems, food consistency and temperature problems, management problems, bacterial, viral, fungal, and parasitic infections, to name a few, are some of the potential conditions that can result in a slow or non-emptying crop.

A thorough review of your management practices, in addition to diagnostic testing, hopefully can uncover the cause of your recent problems. A post mortem examination can often be one of the most useful diagnostic aids in situations where multiple birds are succumbing. You are fortunate that you have not experienced these sort of problems in the past, but many disease conditions or management related problems may take years before they are evident. Work closely with your veterinarian and hopefully your problem will be resolved.

Amy B. Worell, DVM, ABVP-Avian
West Hills, CA

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