

Calcium Demands for Egg Laying Birds

Jenni Jackson, Loxahatchee, FL
www.junglebirds.com

S ometime soon, just when you least expect it, you might find an egg on the bottom of your bird's cage. Believe it or not, this is quite common in pet birds, especially those that were handfed as babies. Hens will often lay eggs without having a male bird present. Their hormone levels can be affected by their human or by a toy or stuffed animal in their cage, triggering an egg laying cycle. Chronic egg laying is most frequently seen in smaller pet birds, especially Cockatiels, lovebirds, and Budgies. Egg laying, whether chronic or occasional, can really take a heavy toll on the health of your bird.

The process of egg production itself can be life threatening, even deadly, to your bird. The reason for this is the high incidence of calcium depletion. Calcium, which comprises nearly half the content of the egg shell, is extracted directly from the food in the hen's intestinal tract or from her bones. If the hen's diet does not contain sufficient calcium, the only alternative the bird's body has is to drain the calcium from her bones to produce the egg shell.

Close observation for changes in the hen are of utmost importance, and these changes can be very subtle. A change in appearance or behavior is a sign that something is going on. Remember to keep in mind that birds are masters at hiding their symptoms until they are at the point of being nearly impossible to treat effectively.

Symptoms of calcium depletion may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- You may notice a change in the hen's feathers. Dullness or lack of

sheen, breaking easily, or irregular patterns in new feathers may indicate a problem.

- She may suddenly start to drop feathers spontaneously or may start plucking.

- The hen may become thin and weak, even though she appears to be eating voraciously. This can be brought on by the hen regurgitating to feed the human, toy, or other object of her affection.

- The hen may have a change in gait, she may drag one foot or the other, may be unsteady on her feet, or may stand on both feet all the time instead of tucking one foot up to sleep.

- She may exhibit drooping of one wing. Bones are brittle and will break easily. Since the calcium is drawn from the large bones, wing and leg fractures are common. This can be due to trauma, or it can be spontaneous in cases of severe calcium depletion.

- She may fall off her perch, or may not be able to perch at all. Seizures and death may follow.

- In breeder situations, babies may be found "broken" in the nest. Crooked backs, and crooked or broken legs are common. Also, babies that are extremely restless or agitated often are exhibiting the first signs of inadequate calcium.

Egg binding is an immediately life-threatening problem that is associated with calcium depletion and inadequate nutrients. Usually seen in hens laying an egg for the first time and in chronic egg layers, egg binding is reported to be most common in finches, Budgies, and Cockatiels. In some cases,

the egg shell is not hardened and cannot be passed. In other cases, the muscles of the lower reproductive tract are not strong enough to pass the egg. Either way, the situation is critical and requires immediate treatment.

One of the first signs of egg binding is the bird sitting on the bottom of the cage, often in the corner. She may be panting, with both eyes closed, standing on both feet with legs farther apart than normal. She may be bobbing her tail up and down in the same rhythm as her panting. She may occasionally strain, as if trying to pass a large stool, then returning to her original stance. She will most likely not eat or drink because she is in a major labor situation. The bird will become exhausted, and will weaken and die if not treated.

It is always best to have immediate care by an avian veterinarian, but emergencies do happen. Egg binding is definitely an emergency, and the following procedure is often successful in saving the life of the hen:

- Get the bird WARM warmth

RED BIRD PRODUCTS, INC!
Highest Quality Leg Bands
2786 Fruitridge Road
Dept. AFA, Sacramento, CA 95820
(916) 421-0517
Send SASE for price list.

 **Lady Gouldians**
Normal
Yellow, Blue, Silver
Peggy Dalrymple
phone/fax (309) 342-9665

 **PHOENIX CAGE CO.**
the finest
in
cages
and
accessories
PHOENIX CAGE CO.
P.O. Box 723, North Fork, CA 93643
(209) 877-4666
www.sierranet.net/net/phoenix/

is always top priority – 90 to 95 degrees if possible in a brooder, cardboard box, or other container.

- Confirm that there is indeed an egg you should be able to feel and see the bulge, and you may be able to see the egg itself pushing on the vent opening.

- If the bird will allow it, place her in a sink or a pan of very warm, not hot, water. This often helps the muscles to pass the egg.

- If the hen will not sit in the water, warm a few drops of mineral oil, baby oil, or cooking oil, (not motor oil) and use an eye dropper to place a drop or two of oil in the vent to lubricate the egg. A few drops on your finger will have to do if you do not have a dropper. Massage the oil into and around the vent opening. With luck, the egg should slide out.

- Be aware that it is possible that the egg will need to be surgically

removed by your avian veterinarian.

- Do not break the egg yourself.
- Keep the bird warm until it can be seen by your avian veterinarian.

Food sources of calcium include apples, beet greens, beets, broccoli, cabbage, Swiss chard, sesame seeds, seaweed, watercress, lemons, oranges, grapefruit, carrots, garlic, strawberries, pineapple, cantaloupe, casaba and honeydew melons, sweet red peppers, tomatoes, limes, grapes, dandelion greens, collard greens, kohlrabi, mustard greens, parsnips, kale, okra, cheese, and yogurt.

Cuttlebone and mineral block are sources of extra calcium that are readily available at your local bird or feed store. It is not recommended that you use the calcium supplement available at feed stores that is formulated for poultry. This source is calcium phosphate, not the recommended calcium carbonate. The phosphate actually prevents the absorption of calcium in psittacine birds.

Calcium supplements in the form of calcium syrup, calcium powder, and injectable calcium are available through an avian veterinarian. These types of supplements need to be monitored by your avian veterinarian because it is possible to have too much calcium, which can lead to kidney problems and serious imbalances.

Mother Nature does the best job she can with what she has. If given a choice, the egg laying hen will eat calcium-rich foods, not just sunflower and safflower seeds, or other food sources that do not provide what she needs..

In the wild, a hen would seek out calcium-rich foods, but a bird in a cage does not have that choice. In the wild, a hen would naturally be exposed to sunlight, which she must have for her body to activate the Vitamin D3 in her body necessary for the absorption of calcium.

A pet bird must be exposed to sunlight as well. If we are to keep birds in a captive environment, whether as pets or as breeders, it is up to us to provide them what they need. Your avian veterinarian should always be consulted when there are questions about the health of your bird. 



Midwest Avian Research Expo '99

10th annual

July 15, 16, 17, 1999

◆ALBUQUERQUE◆

The goal of the Midwest Avian Research Expo is to provide and promote continuous education in order to fund avian research through the cooperative efforts of aviculturists and other interested parties.

1999 RECIPIENTS:

Richard Gough, DVM
Keven Flammer, DVM
Susan Orosz, DVM
David Phalen, DVM

SUPPORT SPEAKERS:

David Graham, DVM
Fern VanSant, DVM
Gail Worth
David McClugage, DVM
Dick Schroeder
Steve Hartman
Eric Peake
Darrel Styles, DVM
Liz Wilson

COMMERCIAL EXHIBITS open to the public Friday and Saturday. For vendor info call Kathy at: (505)823-1889.

Wet Labs Thursday, July 15th.

For more information and conference registration forms, call M.A.R.E. toll-free at:

(800)453-5833

or write:

M.A.R.E.

P.O. Box 90334

Albuquerque, NM 87199

Please don't miss this important event!

Major Raffle ◆ Auction ◆
Banquet ◆ Evening activities
including Balloon Rides. ◆ Join
us for a fun-filled and
educational weekend in the Land
of Enchantment!

Visa/Mastercard
accepted