

Veterinary Viewpoints

Edited by
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All Pets Medical Center, West Hills, CA

Question #1: I received two peach faced lovebirds for Christmas. Six weeks later, the male died suddenly. Autopsy showed Polyomavirus. The surviving female has lost most chest feathers and has a poor appetite. If she is a carrier, does she need to be put to sleep? I don't want her to suffer and she seems to be content. What should I do? Thank you for your recommendation.

C. Bancroft, Nevada

Answer #1: Your female lovebird probably has polyomavirus infection since she has lost the chest feathers and has a poor appetite, which can be a sign of illness. It is possible that she could overcome the disease and clear the virus out of her system. Lovebirds are not really carrier birds of this disease, only Budgerigars. So, she will eventually get rid of the virus if she doesn't get too sick in the meantime. It is also possible that she does not have the virus but misses her friend and has picked her feathers. It is a good idea to have your avian veterinarian do a DNA probe blood test for the virus. She should also be tested for the Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease, since that disease can also cause these symptoms and this virus will not be cleared. If she tests positive for polyomavirus and negative for PBFD, you can test her every six months until she tests negative for the polyomavirus. At that time, you can consider another bird in the household. If she tests positive for the PBFD, you should not get any other birds, since there is not a treatment nor a cure. When she is suffering with this disease, euthanasia is a reasonable option.

*Rhonda K. Stevenson, DVM,
ABVP-Avian, Jacksonville, Florida*

Answer #2: Have your veterinarian test the lovebird for both polyomavirus and beak and feather disease

virus. If either test is positive, strict isolation of the bird from other birds is appropriate. If you have only this bird, there is no need to isolate unless you plan on acquiring more birds. If the polyomavirus is positive, retest in a couple of months. As long as the bird is comfortable and has a good quality of life, there is no need to euthanize it.

*James M. Harris, DVM
Oakland, CA*

Answer #3: I'm sorry about the loss of your male lovebird. Birds as we all know, can appear to be fine and healthy but can be hiding signs of disease. Such may have been the case with your male lovebird. The remaining lovebird, has of course, been exposed to the polyomavirus and should be tested for its presence. Additionally, a test for another virus, Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease (PBFD) should be run. Depending on these test results you can make an informed decision about the remaining bird in regard to your specific circumstances. The most important issue to me is the quality of life that we can offer an animal. Regardless of the bird's viral status, if she is clinically doing well at that time and you plan on obtaining no additional birds, you may consider to leave her alone.

If she is not doing well and you would like to obtain other birds, your decision may be different. It is prudent to know that these virus infections can persist in the environment for extended periods of time, and bringing new birds into the household should be well thought out and considered prior to purchasing new birds.

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

Question #2: Can you explain why some pet parrots are able to eat avocado and chocolate with no ill effects?

I often hear of owners who feed these foods on a regular basis before learning of their dangers. Apparently, the birds suffered no ill effects.

B. Varner, Colorado

Answer #1: The original study on avocado toxicity was done with Cockatiels and Budgerigars. They found varying toxicity depending on the species of avocado (do you know what species your avocado is?). So, the result of ingestion of this fruit would depend on the species of the avocado, the size of the bird, and the amount that is eaten. The birds develop breathing difficulties and die within 24-48 hours after ingestion. So, it is possible for a bird to eat avocado without dying but who wants to take the chance?

Chocolate toxicity is also dependent on the type of chocolate, size of the bird, and the amount that is eaten. Theobromine is the toxic principal in chocolate, which is extremely high in unsweetened baking chocolate and very low in white chocolate. The effect of this substance is that of a stimulant including nervousness, heart irregularities, tremors, seizures, and death within 6-24 hours. So, again, it is possible for a bird to eat chocolate without dying, but it is safer to avoid the risk.

*Rhonda K. Stevenson, DVM,
ABVP-Avian, Jacksonville, Florida*

Answer #2: Avocado is known to make birds sick. Some birds tolerate it without a problem. Chocolate is toxic if consumed in large enough quantities. Pure bakers chocolate is much more toxic than chocolate that has been diluted with milk, sugar, and other additions. Some birds live very long on terrible diets and are given alcohol, salty foods, and caffeine containing beverages all of which are toxic to birds as well as chocolate and avocado. It just goes to show how resilient some creatures are. Just because this happens does not suggest that you should count on your bird tolerating the problem foods. Stick to a good diet.

*James M. Harris, DVM
Oakland, CA*

Answer #3: In the situation involving avocado ingestion and toxicity that has been known to occur in some types of birds, certain substances in the fruit appear to have different reactions on different types of birds. This type of situation is intermittently seen in veterinary medicine with a variety of types of animals and different products. One fairly well known recent example would be in the situation of canine medicine where a type of dog, the Labrador Retrievers may have a potentially fatal reaction with an anti-inflammatory drug, Rimadyl. This seems to me to be similar to what can be seen with avocado ingestion in birds. Many birds have ingested avocado and been fine, while a number of the small species, particularly, Budgies and Cockatiels, have been known to die once ingesting avocado. As it appears that some birds can tolerate avocado and some may not, it is prudent simply to delete this delicious food item from a birds diet.

Regarding chocolate, the ingestion of chocolate produces fatal effects in other species as well as in birds. In my years as a practicing veterinary, I have sadly seen two dogs die from ingestion of chocolate. Both dogs presented vomiting chocolate and died shortly thereafter. Chocolate contains a substance that speeds up the heart. Depending on the amount ingested, type of chocolate and other factors, some animals are unaffected and others can experience adverse side effects. Once again, avoiding chocolate in the diet of birds or at least offering only the smallest amounts to your birds, is prevention in the making.

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

Question #3: What is your opinion of full spectrum lighting for parrots that are kept indoors? Is it true that placing the lights as close to the birds living area as the manufacturer recommends can cause cataracts on the eyes of parrots?

L. Bieniek, CA

Answer #1: I think full spectrum lighting is a good idea but there are still many unanswered questions as to specifically what is needed. Ideally, sunlight is the best but even that is not without risks. Outside, the bird could be subjected to a predator, stolen, exposed to diseases of wild birds, or exposed to the extremes in weather.

Supervised visits outside once weekly or a safe outside cage can work to get some of that ultimate full spectrum light. We do not know all of the benefit of sunlight on these parrots, but the vitamin D connection is known. The preen gland in many species of parrots has a precursor of vitamin D that when it is spread on the feathers and exposed to sunlight, changes to a usable form of vitamin D and is ingested by the bird when the feathers are preened again.. This is wonderful, but it is not necessary when the bird is on a pelleted diet because vitamin D is added to the formulation.

As far as the connection of UV light and cataract formation, we do not have enough information to be able to say there is a cause and effect but since it is possible and some parrots live as long as people, caution and good sense should be observed. Until we have more specific studies and more scientific information on birds, I am currently recommending full spectrum lighting in the room with the bird, but in the normal light fixture. We use this in our hospital in all the rooms where the birds are. These bulbs should be changed periodically.

Rhonda K. Stevenson, DVM, ABVP-Avian, Jacksonville, Florida

Answer #2: I personally like full spectrum lights and use them in my indoor breeding facility. I cannot tell you if they truly make a difference. A good diet and an appropriate vitamin supplement is appropriate whether or not you use the lights. I do not know of any studies that have connected full spectrum lights with cataracts.

James M. Harris, DVM Oakland, CA

Answer #3: I know of no studies showing benefits, problems resolved due to the use of, or harm caused by the use of full spectrum lights in parrots that are kept indoors. The few bird clients who have added full spectrum lights as a potential benefit for feather picking birds have not noticed any changes, positive or negative, regarding the bird or the feathers. I personally do not have an opinion regarding full spectrum lights for parrots kept indoors. There has never been any suggestion (that I am aware of) that full spectrum lights may be instrumental in causing cataracts in birds. So, at this point in time, it appears the use of full spectrum lights for parrots housed indoors is one of individual choice as tangible benefits are not presently apparent in exposed birds.

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



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