

Veterinary Viewpoints

Edited by

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Question #1: I have a female Cockatiel, which has been showing signs of fluffed feathers, sleepiness and labored breathing. Her nares look darkened, possibly inflamed. I took her to an avian vet who treated her with amikin for 10 days, then doxy and baytril with no improvement. Her CBC showed an increased number of neutrophils and lymphs. Then he came up with the idea of lead poisoning with injections twice daily with no improvement. The bird's appetite is good and she drinks. I placed two heat lights to keep her warm. There is no change in the bird's condition. Also, she is not egg bound. Could you please give me some direction to follow or how should I proceed with her care?

K. Dayne, Connecticut

Answer #1: I would suggest that a further more complete workup be done on your Cockatiel. Repeat the blood count, add a chemistry panel and check for viruses with the blood sample. Screening for disease producing bacteria and radiographs of the bird would be useful to rule in or out certain diseases and suggest further specific procedures. Unfortunately, your description of the bird is a generalized picture of a bird that does not feel well but is not specific for any one particular disease.

James M. Harris, DVM
Oakland, CA

Answer #2: It sounds like more tests need to be run on your bird to try to pinpoint the problem. The signs she is showing of being fluffed and sleepy are not specific and can fit almost any sick bird. The labored breathing could be an indication of a respiratory problem or abdominal swelling. The darkened nares could be due to debris buildup in the nostrils and are not necessarily an indica-

tion of inflammation. You said she is not eggbound, but do we know this from a physical examination or a radiograph? The elevated heterophils and lymphocytes indicate inflammation but are not specific as to cause. Since she has been treated with a variety of antibiotics, it seems probable that the problem is not bacterial but other organisms can cause respiratory signs and elevated WBC including fungal, yeast, or even anaerobic bacterial infections. There are specific tests that can be run to determine this. She also could have yolk in the abdomen from an internal ovulation, which could cause the swelling in the abdomen and inflammation. At this point she needs a thorough physical examination, radiographs, a recheck CBC, bacterial and fungal culture, fecal gram stain, an Aspergillosis test (for fungus) and a chlamydia serology test for psittacosis. If her abdomen is swollen, she also needs a fine needle aspirate and microscopic exam of the cells to determine the cause.

Rhoda Stevenson, DVM, ABVP-Avian
Jacksonville, Florida

Answer #3: Many birds will respond to symptomatic care that may include antibiotics when they are ill. In the situation where several antibiotics have been utilized without a positive response, it would be highly advisable to consider a more complete diagnostic workup. Any test that is performed can best be viewed as a potential diagnostic aid, and may or may not result in an answer as to what is ailing the bird. It might also be prudent to consider visiting a second veterinarian that is knowledgeable and experienced with birds. After a thorough physical examination, a complete blood panel that consists of a complete blood count, serum chemistries, amylase and a bile acid, a protein electrophoresis, radiographs or X-rays, and a fecal parasite exami-

nation might be considered. Depending on what the attending veterinarian finds, he or she may suggest additional diagnostic tests for your pet.

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

Question #2: I hope you can help me. I have several flights of Zebra Finches. Each flight is 6 feet X 10 feet and houses 25 hens and 27 males. Recently, the parents have started tossing their babies out of the nest at about five days. They then go on to lay and hatch more eggs only to toss out the babies again at five days and start the cycle all over again. What am I doing wrong, or what should I be doing?

L. Gage, California

Answer #1: I suspect that you have too many birds in your flights. Zebra Finches are very territorial. Consider one breeding pair to an enclosure. Remove all their offspring when they have fledged and are eating on their own.

James M. Harris, DVM
Oakland, CA.

Answer #2: My first impression from the circumstances you describe is that the finches are too crowded and are not comfortable enough with the environment to want to hatch a family. Often when birds feel threatened by something, they have instinct to destroy the eggs of hatchlings so they do not have chicks under adverse circumstances. You might try to decrease the number of birds in the flight by half and see if that improves the problem. Also be sure that there is not another threat that you may not be aware of, like a predator which may include a dog, cat, raccoon, opossum, rodents, hawks, snakes, or even something perceived as a predator like a loud noise or other activities near the aviary. It is also possible that there could be a medical problem affecting the newly hatched

birds and the parents are throwing them out due to that. It would probably be a good idea to have the birds checked by an avian veterinarian if an environmental problem is not found.

Rhoda Stevenson, DVM, ABVP-Avian
Jacksonville, Florida

Answer #3: In my experience, I find that birds may eat their babies, attack them, and throw them out of the nest if they are stressed. Stress can come in a number of forms and what you and I may think is stressful may or may not be stressful to the birds. Some of the stressors that may affect breeding birds are too much human intervention, noises and activity around nesting areas, mice or other rodents in the nestboxes and cages, nearby birds that the parents perceive as threatening, and other environmental occurrences. From your description it seems that you have too many birds for the size of the enclosures and that in itself may stress the birds. It is commonly recommended that you have several more nestboxes in an enclosure than there are pairs of birds, thus you may not have enough nestboxes for the breeding birds. I would suggest that you decrease the number of pairs per enclosure, give the breeders some sort of barriers from other birds or nearby cages, minimize the human intervention and activity around the cages, and possibly put up more nestboxes.

Amy B. Worell, DVM, ABVP-Avian
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Question #3: I have a nine-month-old African Grey that has started pulling feathers. We had a Quaker Parrot that we gave to a good home about four weeks before the Grey started pulling feathers. Nothing else has changed in the environment. Some of the books that I have read state that a juvenile Grey sometimes will pull feathers before the first molt. We have tried two different kinds of sprays to try

and stop him from pulling feathers but it doesn't seem to work. He has many toys and does not lack for attention. I have added some toys and a fake bird to his cage just recently. To see if that might bring him out of it. I refer to him as a him but I don't know for sure. Any suggestions would be appreciated.

T. Gloucester, Missouri

Answer #1: African Greys can be rather high-strung birds. Feather destructive behavior can be induced with any changes or stressors. Although moulting is a stressful time for any bird it does not in itself cause feather destructive behavior. Spraying the bird with over the counter sprays will not help. The only thing to spray birds with is water. Removing the Quaker may have been the trigger for the African Grey to start destroying its feathers. There could also be an underlying medical cause of the picking. I suggest you have the bird evaluated by an avian veterinarian. A good history and a battery of tests will hopefully provide an answer or rule out medical causes of the birds feather pulling. You can have the bird sexed at the same time.

James M. Harris, DVM
Oakland, CA.

Answer #2: FEATHER PICKING is a complex issue and there are many factors that can be involved. The first thing that needs to be determined is whether the bird is actually picking out feathers and possibly damaging the skin or just over preening and chopping off the feathers. This is an important determination because the different activities can indicate different causes. The over preening and chopping is usually an indication of a psychological problem. The relationship between the Quaker parrot leaving the household and the picking may be significant. You did not say why you gave the bird away but birds are flock creatures and the African Grey may feel that a part of his flock is

gone. This can be a stressful situation for the bird because there is perceived danger in being separated from the flock (in the wild they are more susceptible to predation). There could be other stresses in the household that the bird is detecting and responding to as well, including conflict between members of the household.

If the bird is picking out feathers and/or chewing on the skin, there may be a physical problem. These can include bacterial infection, yeast infection, viral infection, insect bites, contact irritants, allergies, underlying low grade fungal infections, low level zinc toxicosis, or other medical problems. The sooner you get help from an avian veterinarian to try to determine the cause, the more success you will have in resolving this often complex and frustrating problem.

Rhoda Stevenson, DVM, ABVP-Avian
Jacksonville, Florida

Answer #3: Feather picking is a captive problem and is not generally seen in the wild. It is generally related to some underlying stress to which many things may be contributing or directly causing the situation. It does seem likely that the removal of the Quaker may have precipitated the feather picking behavior. It is also possible that there is an underlying medical problem that is currently unknown. Either way, once a bird starts to feather pick, regardless of the cause, there is a larger chance than not that the behavior will continue. It would be wise to find a qualified avian veterinarian and have a physical examination performed, along with a full diagnostic workup. You should understand though, that even if an underlying cause is potentially determined, your feathered friend will most likely continue to look the way he does now (or worse) for the rest of his life.

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