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Avian First Aid at Home

by Dorothy Murphy
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

You've awoken this morning feeling queezy and feverish. Do you hurry to the telephone to make an appointment to see your doctor? Probably not; some ailments are just as simply handled at home. This same principle is true for domestic and exotic birds.

Certain foods, water left too long unchanged, lettuce and other green foods left to wilt on the bottom of a cage floor can all contribute to the ill health of our avian friends.

Anyone who owns a pet bird can tell of a time when their bird contracted a simple illness or was involved in a minor accident that the owner knew they could handle if only they knew the proper procedure.

As a breeder of normal and rare parakeets, I have often used avian first aid at home. The following tips will help pet owners to determine what care their bird may need as well as when a veterinarian's care is the solution.

During hot summer months or in warmer climates, loose droppings can be a common avian problem. Since droppings are a combination of bowel matter and urine, it is hard to determine if the problem is diarrhea.

Laxative foods such as green foods and fruit will loosen bowels. In this case, simply withhold all green foods and fruits temporarily. If your bird has been consuming a small amount of vegetable or fruit food daily, slightly loosened bowels will be normal and

healthy.

It is better to count the number of droppings when your bird is healthy. In this way, if your bird becomes suspect of an internal ill, a simple count from fresh bottom paper will reveal an intestinal upset.

Charcoal specifically prepared for birds will better aid your bird's digestion if a small amount of it is added to the bird's gravel supply. However, when you suspect your bird may be ill, many avian veterinarians recommend removal of gravel, since many birds will overeat gravel during illness and develop impactions.

When birds have already contracted diarrhea, it is advisable to replace their water with tea made from the second brew.

This is accomplished by making tea and letting it steep for several minutes. Pour this tea off and then add more boiling water to the used tea bag in the cup. Allow the bird to consume this after cooled, in place of its previous drinking water. Tea may increase the bird's output of urine so don't confuse urine with watery stool.

Diarrhea can be caused by microbes in fouled drinking water. These microbes or germs multiply quite quickly during hot weather, and simultaneously, the bird's intestinal tract is less likely to fight off the infection.

Fresh water daily is better than using chemicals to sterilize water, but if the



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bird has contracted what you believe to be diarrhea due to contaminated foods, aureomycin may be recommended by your bird dealer or veterinarian, along with warmth and rest.

Haphazard administration of antibiotics is not recommended, as the improper use of these drugs without professional guidance may cause more harm than good to the bird. The presence of these medications must be kept at a certain level in the bird's body over a period of time in order to be effective otherwise they will only destroy the beneficial bacteria in the intestine.

Many birds respond to milk sop, a concoction of bread over which warm milk has been poured (one teaspoon of milk to a 2 inch square of bread). Whole wheat bread is preferred. A sprinkling of seed may be added to the top.

This must be removed soon after feeding it to the bird, as the milk will sour rapidly at room temperature.

For larger species of birds, such as parrots and macaws, the milk soaked bread may be squeezed and offered in the food cup.

The bread should help to bind the looseness in the intestines. It is readily accepted by canaries in particular.

Heatstroke is not as common in birds as it is in other pets, but it still remains a threat during hot weather.

Birds left in parked cars or placed in direct sunlight soon become overheated. The birds should always be taken directly home after grooming or visiting.

The symptoms of overheating are easily recognized. The birds will open their wings in an attempt to cool off. Their mouth will also be open.

Birds love the heat, but too much may cause dehydration and possibly death. If your bird should ever get to the stage of possible heatstroke, move it to a cooler location, although never from direct sunlight into an air conditioned room. The drastic temperature change could be fatal to a fragile bird. Be certain, then, that the bird has plenty of fresh air and rest.

Marvin Rothman, DVM, of Collingswood, N.J. noted, "Many bird owners have misconceptions of what they should do to treat birds at home. A serious mistake owners make is to give their birds whiskey. This is a temptation they should avoid. Another mistake is to apply products containing oil to the body of a bird, such as vaseline onto a lesion," says Rothman. "The oil is harmful and should be avoided. Even some commercially prepared products contain oil. Owners should read the

labels of products they buy for their birds."

Sound advice. Oil reduces the insulation value of the bird's feathers. Even a small spot of oil will produce severe heat loss.

If oil is already on the bird, it should be removed with a diluted solution of household soap and rinsed well. After cleaning the bird, if it is thoroughly soaked, it can be wrapped in a towel for a short time or, for larger species, dried using the lowest setting on a blow dryer, held at a reasonable distance from the body of the bird.

Dr. Rothman also considered drafts to be a threat to birds, even during hot summer months. Says Rothman, "In the summer, many people don't worry about drafts. They place their bird's cage near air conditioner vents or leave them in front of an opened window when the temperature goes down at night. These locations are not suitable for birds and may cause illness."

Birds who rustle and flap roughly in their cages due to fights with other birds or fright of handling by the owner, may injure their wing or break feathers to the point where they bleed. Bleeding feathers can be serious if left untreated. Infection will easily set in.

To remove the bleeding feather, wrap the bird in a towel, leaving the area with the bleeding feather free. Have someone handy to help you. The pulling of the feather will require two free hands.

Grasp solidly the broken feather and pull quickly with a straight and even motion. When the feather is removed, the bleeding will stop. Soon, a new feather will replace it.

Some birds develop a nasty habit of pulling out their own feathers and chewing them. Often this is a nutritional deficiency. The addition of animal protein to the bird's diet is beneficial. For larger birds, bits of dry dog food can be added to the food dish, or tiny bits of meat may be readily accepted. For smaller species, mealworms may be supplemented to the diet.

Other causes for plucking may be overcrowding, stress, overuse of bright lights, too many hours of artificial illumination, and even poor ventilation.

If your bird has already developed one of these nasty habits of feather plucking, Dorothy Schults of Langhorne's Schults' Bird Farm recommends first checking to see if the bird has a problem with mites.

She continues, "Many times birds will pluck because it is a habit they've developed. Bird owners should add

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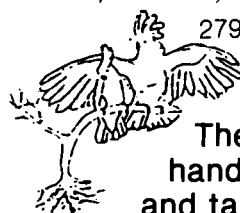
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Cleaning a cut on the claw of a tamed baby parrot.



The proper way to hold a small bird to avoid being bitten is, gently, with the head between the first two fingers.



Supplies you should keep on hand for first aid at home are (clockwise from left) a clean towel, peroxide, external parasite spray, worming eradicator, aureomycin, second-brew tea, vitamins, milk sop for small birds (with seed on top) and for larger birds (with sunflower seed on top), and clean cotton swabs.



Some birds will snag a claw and it will bleed, often to the distress of the owner as well as the bird. A quick dip in peroxide will stop the bleeding in most cases.

vitamins and minerals to their bird's diet during stages of plucking."

Says Schults, "If the bird has bared flesh showing, the bird should be bathed early in the day, using a fine spray of warm water until the bird is thoroughly wet. Be sure the bird is in a draft-free room. The bathroom is a good choice for this.

"I don't recommend adding anything to the surface of the bird's body, to avoid the added risk of infection. Cleanliness is most important."

If there are signs of infection, such as redness or weeping, a diagnosis from a veterinarian is in order.

Bleeding claws, if not severed completely off, can also be handled at home. It is important when cutting a bird's nails to hold the claw up to bright light in order to see the vein.

Some birds will snag a claw in a fight with other birds. By applying a styptic pencil or quickly dipping the bloodied claw into peroxide, the bleeding should stop.

A sickly bird is evident by its appearance. Watery, discolored droppings, ruffled feathers, excessive sleeping, lethargy, discharge from the nostrils or eyes are symptoms. In these cases, a hospital cage will be an important first aid supply.

One can be made by draping a towel over three sides of a cage and placing a light on the fourth side. Too much light too long can inhibit the bird's sleep, however. Use a thermometer and watch the temperature. It should be around 90°.

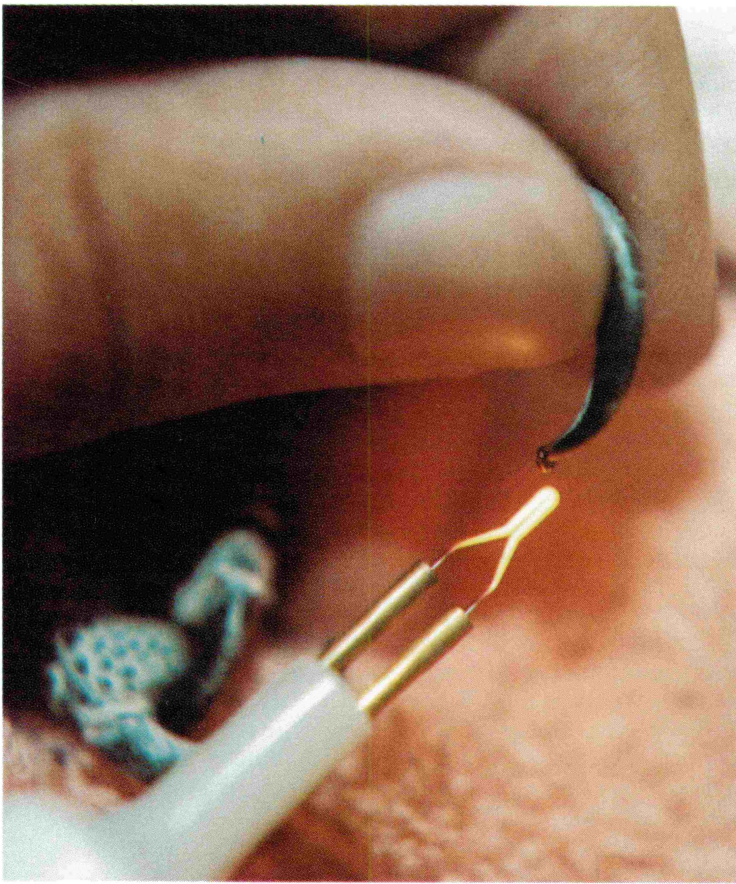
Another type of hospital cage can be fashioned by placing a small cage on a heating pad and covering three sides with a towel. Again, watch that the setting is not too high.

Birds sitting ruffled, frantically picking at itchy points on their bodies may be suffering from parasites. These are a troublesome lot and not uncommon.

External parasites are easily cured by bird owners at home. These may be quickly exterminated with commercially available sprays. Remember to keep the spray away from the bird's eyes and to ventilate for the bird as well as for yourself.

A good scrubbing of the cage as well as the toys will be in order. Thin cracks in aging perches are an ideal hiding place for parasites and such perches should be replaced.

Sulfur-based lotions will rid your birds of the corruptions caused by scaly-face and scaly-leg. This external parasite is caused by a mite which burrows itself into the scales of the leg, face, or cere of



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the bird. Scalex is a good choice for this. It should be applied with a clean swab each time it is used.

When doing any form of first aid in your home, it is imperative to take care in keeping order and cleanliness in your work otherwise you risk spreading infection.

In the case of internal parasites, the stools will be noticeably loose and bloody. Your bird will experience a loss of appetite.

There are many types of internal parasites, and they may be found in the intestinal system, the blood stream, and the respiratory system.

Careful diagnosis and specific treatment for internal parasites should be made by a veterinarian.

Internal parasites have a complicated cycle. They may spend only part of their lives in a bird and the other in an insect.

It is important that along with internal medication recommended by the vet, other measures be taken at home by the owner. Frequent changes of the paper on the bottom of the cage are needed, as the parasites are spread by the ingestion of contaminated droppings. The cage or aviary must be cleaned and disinfected.

As we become more at ease with our birds, it is common for owners to let their birds fly about their homes. It should be remembered that birds do not see windows or mirrors very well. They will fly directly into and even through panes of glass, and fall onto the floor.

Should your bird render itself unconscious, make the bird very warm. This is first aid that must be done at home right away. If your bird does not come around in a few moments, keep it wrapped and take it to a veterinarian.

Dr. Rothman stated, "Many people don't think of a veterinarian for their pet bird until there is an emergency. Not all veterinarians treat birds. It's a good idea for owners to find an avian veterinarian before there is a problem."

This is good insurance. Many people never bother to take their pet for a check up because they assume the fee will be more than the bird is worth. Tell this to someone who's developed a relationship with a bird who's suddenly gone sickly. They'll agree a good vet is worth the fee.

Expect to pay about \$20 for small to medium sized birds. Because the larger species require two people for an examination, they're usually about \$30.

For a \$1500 macaw, it is money well spent. For a \$15 parakeet? Ask someone who's had their pet for a few years.

Those years of care may at one time

or another lead you to the experience of a choking bird. It can be lifesaving to know what to do if you suspect that your bird's crop is impacted.

Impaction will happen due to food a bird has eaten and that has compacted into a solid mass which the bird cannot swallow into its gizzard for digestion. Sometimes, birds who are breeding or courting and are feeding one another may become impacted.

Many bits of seed will be spit out and you will find them stuck onto the cage by mucous. Relief is needed. The mass lodged in the crop will cause infection.

Mineral oil, only a drop, may be placed a tiny bit at a time into the bird's beak to help soften the mass. If this first aid does not help, the bird should be taken to the veterinarian for crop surgery.

Birds, especially the larger species, are well-known for their mischievous travels.

For example, Jake, a lilac crowned Amazon parrot, discovered a Bic pen during his household antics. His owner, Mary Johnston, quickly flushed the bird's beak inside and out with clear water, removing as much of the ink as possible. Despite her fright in finding her pet chewing the pen, a quick call to her vet and clear thinking saved Jake's life. By the way, she also called the poison control center. It's surprising how much help an organization for humans can be in an emergency situation.

Natural gas from a kitchen stove or the gas emitted from a kerosene heater can be just as deadly as other toxins. Even the chemical fumes of a burnt teflon pan are toxic.

A bird suffering this type of ill will lie collapsed, breathing shallow, and with glazed eyes. Fresh air is the best treatment you can give for this at home. If the bird is unconscious, it can be given oxygen by a veterinarian.

These methods of first aid may lead your bird to not treat you with the same gentility that you offer to your pet. You may now be the one in need of first aid!

If you have been bitten or scratched into the flesh, rinse with copious amounts of fresh running water, and then with peroxide. Very deep punctures will require a doctor's attention.

All of these first aid methods may help your bird to survive in an emergency, but *you* are the key to success. Learning to recognize problems comes with practice and experience.

Your bird will thank you with the good health and feather that you helped it to maintain. Here's to a healthy future! ●

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