

# Veterinary Viewpoints

compiled by Amy Worell, D.V.M.  
Woodland Hills, California

**Question 1:** I raise budgies and have the problem where one of the hens plucks the feathers on the babies while they are in the nestbox. Other than handfeeding the babies, is there any way to prevent the hen from plucking the babies?

S. Thompson, Colorado

**Answer:** Although I am not an experienced budgie aviculturist, I can relay some of the problems my clients have encountered in the past with their own budgie flocks.

There can be many reasons for a hen plucking her offspring; most commonly, it is a non-experienced hen with her first clutch. The reason behind this untoward hostility is not well understood and the behavior is difficult if not impossible to modify.

Another common problem in budgie aviaries is overcrowding. Competition for nestboxes may result in domestic squabbling. Also the curiosity of other hens who are not involved in chick rearing of their own may cause the anxious mother to transfer aggression and frustration to her own chicks while fending off the nosey intruders. This problem can be remedied by adding an adequate number of nestboxes and reducing the number of birds within the flight. Many budgie breeders suggest that excess hens in the communal aviary tend to generate more problems.

Unnecessary disturbances from outside sources, such as children or housepets (dogs or cats, for example), may induce the neurotic behavior. Also, overly inquisitive owners "checking" on the progress of the clutch may result in the plucking activity. Reducing outside distractions will assist in reducing stress on the hen which provides a more "secure" environment for rearing her offspring.

Nutritional deficits such as a protein deficiency may contribute to such behavior. However, ensuring that the hen is provided with an adequate supply of nutritionally balanced ration will eliminate this possibility.

Finally, some hens perform this ritual habitually and some may even savage their chicks by biting or killing them. If this problem becomes chronic, and none of the above mentioned solutions seems to help, then the aviculturist may have to hand rear the chicks or better yet, farm out the eggs to a foster mother to avoid the problem.

Dr. Darrel K. Styles  
Miami, Florida

**Answer:** I would suggest that you consider trying a new mate, modify the environment so that there are less environmental distractions, or consider not breeding that particular hen anymore.

Dr. James M. Harris  
Oakland, California

**Answer:** I have commonly encountered the problem of birds (both the hen and the cock) plucking the feathers of their offspring while they are still in the nestbox. I have noted that this situation occurs in a number of species, in particular, in both budgies and cockatiels.

The reasons for this behavior are potentially numerous, and may vary with the particular pair of birds in question. I have often related this behavior to parents that have a strong desire to go back to nest and lay another clutch of eggs. Potentially, the parent birds are attempting to encourage their young offspring to prematurely fledge the nest in an effort to empty the nest for the next round.

Other than handfeeding the abused youngsters, fostering the chicks under a receptive hen may be a viable and workable option for your particular problem.

Additionally, re-evaluating the nesting environment for potential distractions and stressful factors may prevent this problem in some pairs. Good luck!

Dr. Amy Worell  
Woodland Hills, California

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**Question 2:** Are there any human viruses that can be transferred to birds? My Amazon was treated for the bacteria *Streptococcus* and I'm concerned about health.

M. Sterling, Florida

**Answer:** No there are not. "Human" viruses are not infectious for avian species. Some avian viruses are capable of infecting humans. Normally *Streptococcus* species is not a disease producer in birds.

Dr. James H. Harris  
Oakland, California

**Answer:** In a general sense, and without being overly scientific, animal viruses are obligate intracellular parasites, meaning that viruses require the commandeering of the cells of animals, including the cellular genetic machinery since the virus lacks some of the necessary replicative material in order to reproduce independently. Most bacteria, however, will reproduce in any nutritive medium under the proper growth conditions, which may be independent of a host such as in a laboratory culture dish. Bacteria carry a full genetic reproductive complement and do not require the cellular machinery to reproduce. (However there are some bacteria which do require animal cells, such as the organism which causes psittacosis). In summary, one may think of a virus using the cell as a "virus producing factory" and the bacteria uses the cell for food.

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Since viruses require animal cells in order to reproduce, viruses have developed a higher "host-specificity" as compared to bacteria which are more opportunistic. Therefore a virus which is lethal for birds may be harmless to people, since that virus carries the specific tools for infecting avian cells but lacks the necessary modifications for infecting human cells. However, not all viruses are quite as discriminating; and there are certainly several viruses that are capable of infecting birds and people.

There are documented cases of St. Louis Encephalitis Virus, of which wild birds are reservoirs, infecting people by means of mosquito bites. Also, Newcastle Disease is known to cause illness in man and has been shown to be transmitted from infected fowl to humans. These are instances of zoonotic infection, or avian viruses infecting humans. But to my knowledge, there are no recorded cases of a "human" virus infecting a bird under "natural" conditions.

Bacteria are less host-specific, and many species of bacteria will tend to thrive when provided with a fertile environment and proper conditions. There are documented cases where owners have infected their birds with bacteria such as tuberculosis. And there are numerous cases in which the bird has infected the owner with bacteria such as the Psittacosis organism and Salmonella.

Therefore, the pet owner should not worry unduly about "infecting" their bird with human pathogens, but should recognize that the possibility exists.

Dr. Darrel K. Styles  
Miami, Florida

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**Question 3:** Both my cockatiels and Amazons do something, on occasion, that could be normal but I'm not sure. In the evening, when relaxing after eating their last meal, they stretch their necks as if to dislodge something stuck in their throat. Is this a problem I need to look into?

C. Gaddis, California

**Answer:** Many birds have been noted to do the neck stretching activity that you have described. In many cases it may be normal, but it could be a medical problem worth checking into. Please consider having your avian veterinarian examine your pets.

Dr. James M. Harris  
Oakland, California

**Answer:** I have often observed this activity in many species of parrots and refer to it as the "stretch-yawn". Physiologically, I am not sure that yawning is occurring, since the yawn is still not well understood, even in humans. But the stretching is definitely occurring and is quite apparent. Since this activity is observed in healthy birds, I interpret this as "normal" behavior.

Birds which are "choking" due to blockage of the trachea will display signs of respiratory distress such as unusual respiratory sounds, open-mouth breathing, or tail-bobbing. Birds which have a blockage in the esophagus may also display similar signs due to pressure on the trachea.

Dr. Darrel K. Styles  
Miami, Florida

**Answer:** Neck stretch and gaping is a commonly encountered entity among caged birds. In the vast majority of situations, this activity should be considered normal and non-problematic, particularly in the situation where it is frequently noticed

and the birds are clinically fine otherwise, as in your situation.

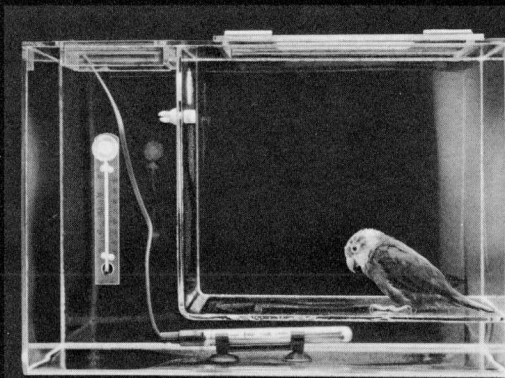
Pathological, or problematic neck stretching or gaping can occur due to a number of causes. In the single bird, it might possibly be due to a foreign body in the gastrointestinal tract or as an attempt to dislodge something lodged in the oral cavity.

In a group of birds, one might consider the presence of a parasite which is aptly named the gapeworm. This gapeworm, *Syngamus trachea*, is actually caused by a parasite called a nematode. It has been encountered in passerines, psittacines, columbiformes, and galliformes, as well as in several other orders of birds. Once commonly encountered in domestic fowl, it is now only occasionally identified. The parasite obstructs the trachea and causes the bird to stretch out its neck in a characteristic "gape", as it attempts to dislodge the worm and allow passage of air into the lungs. Though this problem is frequently referred to in the veterinary literature, this author has never identified a case involving gapeworms.

Amy Worell, DVM  
Woodland Hills, California ●

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