

Signs of illness in birds

Birds are prey animals in the wild. As a result, they have adapted to hide their illnesses. A bird that looks sick is soon someone's lunch. Unfortunately, our pet birds still follow this rule even though it is not necessary in captivity. Birds are so good at hiding illness that we often don't realize they are sick until they have been sick for sometime—until they are REALLY sick. This is why veterinarians get scared to see birds and you hear the story of "I brought my bird to the vet and then he died when the vet examined him." As bird owners, it is our job to watch our birds carefully and notice any subtle changes that might require a visit to the veterinarian. Below I will review some signs of illness that indicate you need to bring your bird to the veterinarian.

Early signs of disease:

- Prolonged molt
- Broken, bent, picked, chewed feathers
- Dull feather color or change in feather color
- Sneezing, nasal discharge
- Droppings accumulating on the feathers around the vent
- Swelling or redness around the eyes
- Sores on the bottoms of the feet
- Overgrowth of the beak
- Minor changes in talking, eating, other behavior

Signs of serious illness: If you see any of these things, bring your bird to the veterinarian right away!

- Significant change in appearance of droppings: too few, too small, more water, diarrhea, consistent change in color (not just a single blue dropping from eating blueberries or watery dropping after taking a shower)
- Decreased appetite
- Decreased drinking
- Increased drinking
- Change in personality or behavior
- Fluffed
- Decreased vocalization
- Sitting at the bottom of the cage
- Swelling anywhere on the body
- Bleeding or injury
- Vomiting/regurgitation
- Eyes/nostril discharge
- Breathing issues—tail bobbing, noisy breathing, breathing heavily, open-mouthed breathing
- Sleeping more than normal

Monitoring weight:

Monitoring weight is one way to catch illnesses early. That is why I recommend all bird owners have an electronic Gram scale and weigh their birds weekly (see the article on

digital scales). The most common thing to see is weight loss but with some illnesses we will see weight gain. If you notice a significant change in your bird's weight (+/-10%) then a visit to the veterinarian is warranted.

Have a relationship with your avian veterinarian:

It is helpful to have a relationship with an avian veterinarian BEFORE your bird gets sick. That will make the veterinarian more likely to fit you in on an emergency basis and will also give you and the doctor some baseline information (eg how much the bird usually weighs, how the bird acts at the vet's office, blood work results from when the bird is healthy). It is also helpful to know the local emergency clinics that will see birds and have their numbers handy (on the fridge, by the phone etc).

By bringing your bird to an avian veterinarian for well checks, by noticing subtle changes in behavior in your bird, and by acting quickly when you do see signs of illness, you will be well on your way towards helping your bird live a long and happy life.