

Signs of Health and Sickness in Your Bird

By Virginia Clemans, DVM

If you have chosen a bird as a companion, you probably know about the many joys and challenges of having birds as pets. Here are some general guidelines that you can follow to make sure your feathered friends stay healthy and happy over the course of their (often) long lives.

First and foremost, you must remember that by the time a bird shows any blatant signs of illness, that illness has usually become quite advanced. So, it is especially important that you keep a close eye on your bird and seek veterinary care at the very first sign of a problem.

Signs of good health in a bird include bright eyes, clean and shiny feathers, good appetite and lots of energy.

Healthy birds eat often and are quite active. The bird's droppings should be composed of a black or dark green solid, a clear part, and a creamy white part. Healthy birds eat a lot and make a lot of droppings!

Birds who die "suddenly" have usually been sick for some time and no one realized it. So watch carefully for any change in your bird's normal attitude or behavior. A bird who isn't interested in food is definitely ill. Some other signs of illness include a sleepy or lethargic appearance, huddling or sitting low on the perch or on the cage floor, fluffed feathers, weight loss (signaled by a prominent keel or breast bone), open-mouth breathing, and any discharge from the eyes or nose. Also watch for any change in droppings – an increase or decrease in the amount, or any change in appearance.

If your bird shows any of these signs, a visit to the veterinarian is essential. Try to establish yourself with an avian veterinarian in your area before an emergency occurs. Since birds are so unique, they do better in the hands of a specialist familiar with their treatment and care. If you can't get to the veterinarian right away, keep the bird warm (a room temperature of at least 85 degrees). An ordinary heating pad wrapped around the cage is a good way to maintain temperature. Cover the cage and protect it from drafts.

Also, when you first get your bird, a veterinarian should give him or her a "well bird" exam right away. This exam will insure that your new friend is free from disease. It's also a good time to introduce yourself and your bird to the vet, and get instructions on diet and nutrition, housing and medical needs. After the initial visit, all birds should have yearly health exams throughout their lives.

A final note: Never give a bird medication without consulting with a veterinarian first. Many human or other animal medications are harmful to birds. You can waste valuable time trying to treat your bird yourself – and you can do more harm than good. It's best to let your veterinarian prescribe the most appropriate and safest treatment.

Dr. Virginia Clemans was Best Friends' chief veterinarian from 2001 to 2004. She now resides in Salt Lake City, where she is chief of staff for the Utah County Fix, a low-cost, high-volume spay/neuter and vaccine clinic sponsored by No More Homeless Pets in Utah, Maddie's Fund and Best Friends Animal Society.

