



WHY SHOULD I TAKE MY BIRD TO THE VET? The Need for an Annual Examination

For most people the decision to take their cats and dogs for an annual physical exam is an obvious and easy one. Why, then do many bird owners not automatically do the same? Most likely the reasons are rooted in tradition. Many of us had a granny who had a budgie in a cage, she gave it seed and grit, and when it died, she got a new me. Well, avian medicine and our knowledge of birds' environmental, nutritional and psychological needs have advanced by leaps and bounds in the last two decades, and we now know that birds don't just die for any reason. If we aren't practicing preventive health care, offering a good diet and an optimal physical and psychological environment, it isn't because we don't know how to do so. The body of knowledge is growing rapidly, and the information is out there.

The most important reason that you should take your bird to the vet is to gather information. Choose your vet carefully. He has to be someone you trust, but he also has to have the information. One simple thing to check for is whether or not he is a member of the Association of Avian Veterinarians. Every vet conducts an exam differently, but no matter what else, you should leave with the feeling that as well as having made an assessment of his health, your vet has an understanding of your bird's home environment, his diet, and his relationship with the people in his life.

On a bird's first visit to a vet, a thorough history should be taken. This should include the following:

How long have you owned this bird? How old is he?
Do you know what sex he is? If so, how was this determined?
If female, has the bird ever laid eggs?
Where did you get him?
Is he hand fed? Is he weaned?
Has he had a previous owner and for how long?
Has your bird had a wing clip? If so, by what pattern? Can your bird fly? Has the bird had a previous vet check? Has he ever been ill?
Has he had any testing done, such as PBFD testing?
Do you have other birds? Where are they from?
Did you quarantine this one?
Have your other birds been seen by an avian vet?
Do you have any pets other than birds?
What type of cage do you have? How large is it?
In what area of which room is the cage located?
What is on the floor of the cage?
How often do you change the floor covering?
How often do you clean, and how often do you disinfect the cage?

What do you use to clean and disinfect?
What types of perches are in the cage?
Is there any sandpaper in the cage on the floor or on the perches?
Describe your bird's toys. How many are there?
Do you rotate them? Are there smokers in the house?
Does your bird come out of his cage? If so, is he supervised?
How often is he out, and for how long?
Does your bird bath, or do you spray him?
How often? Do you apply anything to his feathers other than water? Are his wings clipped?
How much consecutive hours of undisturbed darkness (sleep), does your bird get at night?
Do you cover the cage at night?
What do you feed your bird?
What does he actually eat?
Do you offer any supplements, minerals or vitamins?
When did your bird last molt?
Does your bird go outside?
Are there any concerns about the bird's behavior?



An avian veterinary surgeon will initially examine your bird from a distance, usually as he sits in his cage, or carrier. He will assess, among other things, the bird's posture, his plumage, his respiration and attitude. Typically this happens as your vet takes a history. To perform a physical examination, the bird must be caught. If your bird has not been handled, it has not been examined. The physical exam includes assessment of body condition, eyes, ears, nares, choana, beak, feet, plumage, skin, vent, palpation of the abdomen and auscultation of the heart and respiratory system.

If your bird has been presented for a well bird examination, in addition to examining the bird from a distance, and performing a physical examination, an avian vet should offer tests to establish, as far as possible, that the bird is in good health. It can NEVER be stated with certainty that a bird is free of ill health and disease. We can, however, discover a great deal about a bird's condition. There are several diseases for which specific tests are available, and valuable information regarding general health can be obtained from a variety of screening tests.

Your veterinary surgeon should be able to explain to you the limits of some tests. For instance, while a positive Chlamydia test will confirm that your bird has been exposed to the organism, it cannot predict when or if the bird will show signs of disease. Some conditions take time to show themselves, and so a quarantine period is always advisable before mixing birds. The health of resident, as well as that of incoming birds should be considered. Finally it must be remembered that for some diseases, for example Pacheco's Disease, asymptomatic carriers exist, and for others, such as Proventricular Dilatation Disease, no test and no incubation period have been established.

Individual cases will vary, but the following tests should be considered for well new or first visit to the vet:

Complete Blood Count (CBC) or Hematology, to screen for anemia and blood parasites; for infection or inflammation

Blood biochemistry to evaluate among other things, kidney and liver parameters, calcium and blood sugar levels

Chlamydia test, to screen for exposure to or infection with Chlamydia, the bacterium that causes psittacosis

Fecal analysis, to screen for the presence of parasites.

Choanal, crop and cloacal gram stain, a method of screening for potentially disease-causing bacteria

Choanal, crop and cloacal cultures, which grow the bacteria from these areas, and if necessary, allow appropriate antibiotics to be chosen

Whole body radiograph (X-ray), a useful means of evaluating among other things, heart, liver and kidney size. Air sac or lung disease may be detected, and bone quality can be evaluated. This usually requires general anesthesia

Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease (PBFD) test

Polyoma Virus test



In most cases all test results will be normal, but once in a while, an abnormal or suspicious result is seen. Further investigation or treatment can then be undertaken. If testing yields no cause for concern, a parrot can then be seen annually. If the bird remains outwardly healthy, and does not come into contact with new birds of unknown health status, we suggest that your bird visit his vet annually, it is also recommended that some tests be repeated at regular intervals:

ANNUALLY:

- Physical examination
- Husbandry and diet review
- CBC
- Biochemistry
- Fecal analysis (possibly more often if the bird spends time out of doors)
- Choanal and cloacal gram stains

EVERY TWO TO THREE YEARS:

- Whole body radiograph
- Chlamydia test

In repeating tests regularly, our goal is to establish a range of normal values for your bird. "Normal" varies between species of bird, and between individuals of the same species. Tracking results from year to year can help us to identify early signs of disease. Many birds will show changes in blood or other tests, long before they manifest outward signs of illness. Prevention of disease and early detection of illness are among the smart important principles of avian medicine, because birds are so adept at hiding disease and pain. These tools are crucial in assessing their health. No combination of tests can guarantee a bird's health, but time and time again, tests reveal areas of concern, which could never have been detected, even with the most thorough physical examination.

Your vet will want to know whether or not you have any reason to think your bird unwell. He will likely ask whether or not you have noticed any eye or nose discharge, sneezing, vomiting, a change in droppings, or a change in voice or in behavior. Often bird owners have only the uncomfortable feeling that all is not well, and it is important to follow this instinct. You know your bird best, and even if the best you can say is that "He isn't quite right," pursue this feeling. Since parrots are prey animals, they have developed the defense of looking normal when they are not. If a bird looks sick or weak or vulnerable, he is most likely to be eaten or to be ostracized from the flock. By the time a bird is obviously ill, he is very ill, and may have been so for some time. It is vital, therefore, to be aware of "sick bird signs", and to act quickly. It isn't so much the case that birds are more fragile than many other pets, rather it's that they have usually been sicker than anyone realizes, and for a longer time.



In addition, the following are questions your vet may ask when presented a sick bird:

When did you first notice the problem? Did it come on suddenly, or gradually? What signs have you noticed? These often include the “classic” sick bird signs: eye or nose discharge, sneezing, vomiting, regurgitation, weakness, appearing fluffed or sleepy, decreased activity or vocalization, a change in voice, altered droppings (e.g. watery droppings, diarrhea, a change in stool color, seeds or blood in the droppings, aggression or fear in a previously well adjusted pet.

Has the bird changed his eating and drinking habits?

If the bird spends time out of the cage, has he been chewing on furniture, painted or other objects?

Does he have access to plants?

Is anyone else in the house ill?

Have you given your bird any medication or taken him to another vet?

Is it necessary to take a bird to the vet every year? Obviously illness can strike in much less time than that, and a sick bird should never wait, but an annual visit is an opportunity to ask specific questions such as these:

- A chance to review nutrition and perhaps, make some improvements.
- A chance to review husbandry, and perhaps to be reminded of what we should be doing, but aren't.
- A chance to discuss your bird's behavior as he matures.

The bird's physical exam findings can be compared with last year's, and with what we would consider normal for him. The bird's weight can be recorded and compared. Frequently owners will be unaware of changes that have taken place slowly, but to the vet who has not seen the bird for a year, these alterations may be obvious and significant.

Tests are recommended to suit the individual case, and if results are normal, then we simply continue to follow them from year to year. Sometimes, however, a test result will prompt treatment or further investigation. It is not unusual for significant cause for concern to be detected and addressed before the bird is overtly very ill. At the very least, results from year to year when compared, may reveal trends which need to be monitored, and provide your bird's own set of normal values with which to compare any suspicious results. The opportunity to discuss advances in avian medicine and nutrition, and developments in our understanding of birds' environmental and psychological needs.

What about the cost? Good bird care simply isn't cheap. The bird often isn't cheap, and neither is a good cage, a good diet or good veterinary care. The important thing is good value for your money. Be sure that you understand why your veterinary surgeon recommends what he does. Not every owner can afford every test, but some things are too important to omit, and health care plans can be tailored to almost any budget. Prevention and early detection of disease are the least costly and most likely the means to a long-lived, healthy bird. Plan to spend on your bird, and consider insurance. We all know they are worth it.