



## PET BIRDS AND POISONS

Studies show that poisonings in birds can be divided roughly as follows: 25% pesticides, 25% cleaning products, 23% plants and medicines and 27% other sources, including heavy metals.

Birds are exquisitely sensitive to toxins due to the nature of their metabolism and the specialized nature of their respiratory tracts. Air quality is one of the single most important factors in maintaining our companion birds' health, and very low levels of a surprising number of inhaled substances can cause serious damage or death. Birds who are allowed free flight, or those who are out of the cage without supervision are more likely to come in to contact with potentially dangerous substances. Some birds, whether because of their species, age or personalities are more likely to get in to something toxic. Birds who do not have boundaries set for them, or are bored are more likely to go looking for trouble and to find it. Consider your bird's environment in light of the following, which have been linked to illness or death in pet birds; paranoia isn't always a bad thing. If you know of, or suspect exposure, seek immediate veterinary advice.

### POTENTIAL HOUSEHOLD TOXINS

Birds, especially the small ones, are the first in our homes to suffer the effects of inhaled household gases or particulate material. Larger birds are often allowed out of the cage without supervision or are permitted to chew potentially dangerous objects:

- Most non-stick surfaces coated with Polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE) such as cookware, irons, curling irons, heating lamps, ironing board covers, Teflon coated objects

- Hairdryer fumes (especially when new)

- Smoke from tobacco, wood burning fires, etc.

- Automobile exhaust, carbon monoxide, leaded gasoline fumes (are your birds housed above or next to the garage? Engines continue to produce fumes for at least an hour after being turned off.)

- Self-cleaning ovens

- Pesticide strips and sprays

- Hairsprays and permanent solutions, etc.

- Chemical sprays such as disinfectants, deodorizer, furniture polish, carpet deodorizing powders and plug-in air fresheners, aroma therapy

- Glues, paints, nail varnish and remover, perfumes Ammonia and strong bleach, pool chemicals, drain cleaners Mothballs (naphthalene, Para dichlorobenzene)

- Spray starch – fluoropolymers

- Burning foods and cooking oils

- Aerosols, fumigants

- Graphite pencils, matches

- Styptic pencils

- Dust associated with renovations



Signs your bird may show if he has inhaled a toxin: difficulty breathing, open mouth breathing, abnormal posture, reluctance to move, change in voice, panic and frantic behavior, fluffed feathers, wings held out from body, death.

## PESTICIDES

### Open windows are often the source:

Rodent poisons, herbicides, organophosphates, carbamates and insecticides having been designed to kill one thing or another, are inherently toxic. Fertilizers are also commonly toxic. Toxic ingredients include, but are not limited to, dursban, carbaryl, diazinon, Malathion, dichlorvos and dieldrin. An affected bird will show signs related to the gastrointestinal tract and the nervous system: reluctance to eat; diarrhea; slow crop emptying; tremors; lack of co-ordination; seizures; paralysis; difficulty breathing. With low grade, chronic exposure, decreased egg production, decreased hatchability and poor quality chicks are seen. Rodenticides often contain agents, which interfere with blood clotting, such as warfarin, brodifacoum, and indanedione. Signs in the bird include bleeding under the skin, nosebleeds, swollen joints and difficulty breathing due to bleeding within the joints or wings. Ingestion of rodenticides, herbicides or fungicides may occur if feed, water or bedding has been contaminated. Young and small birds are especially susceptible. Para dichlorobenzene, found in "mite protectors" causes gastrointestinal upset, tremor and seizures if chewed.

## COMMON TOXIC PLANTS

Oleander, Yew, Lily of the Valley, Rhododendron, Foxglove (all toxic to the heart); Dieffenbachia, Philodendron, Pothos, Peace Lily, Schefflera (all intensely irritating to the mouth and digestive tract). Black Locust, Clematis, Lupine, Crown Vetch, Poinsettia, Virginia Creeper are toxic. Parsley has been reported to be toxic to ducks and ostriches.

## HEAVY METALS

### Sources of lead and zinc include:

Lead based paints and putty; plaster impregnated with lead; lead shot; galvanized containers; dishes and hardware such as wire, fasteners, nuts and bolts (lead and zinc); foil from some champagne and wine bottles (lead); some welds on older cages (lead); curtain or fishing weights, and those present in some children's or bird toys (lead); stained glass seams and some costume jewellery (lead); US pennies minted after 1982 (zinc); solder (lead); hardware cloth (lead and zinc); contaminated feed and bone meal (lead); bells with lead clappers; improperly glazed ceramics and batteries (lead); backs of mirror (lead); leaded gasoline fumes; linoleum and tiles (lead); base of light bulbs (lead). Zinc is soluble in soft water and organic acids (eg. fruit juice). This is a common means by which feed and water sources become contaminated.



Signs of toxicity vary with the amount of lead and/or zinc ingested and the time over which ingestion occurs. Low grade, chronic toxicity is common. Gastrointestinal signs include weight loss, vomiting, diarrhea, watery droppings and blood in the stool or urine. Seizures, weakness, kidney disease, feather abnormalities and being generally poorly are often associated with prolonged exposure to heavy metals.

#### MISCELLANEOUS HOUSEHOLD TOXINS

**Oil Toxicosis:** oils and greasy substances, including many medications can lead to hypothermia if in contact with feathers. If preened off the feathers and ingested, or absorbed through the skin, they may lead to diarrhea, dehydration, and regurgitation. Inhalation can lead to pneumonia and other respiratory disease. Hot oils will easily burn thin avian skin.

**Chocolate Toxicity:** Theobromine is the toxic alkaloid in chocolate, and if enough is consumed, it will cause excitement, followed by depression of the nervous system, regurgitation, convulsions and death.

**Chlorine (including bleach):** Chlorine fumes, like chlorine gas, causes anything from mild stinging of the eyes and throat, to severe chemical burns of the eyes and respiratory tract. Chronic low-grade exposure will cause conjunctivitis and pneumonia.

**Hexachlorophene (found in some soaps and deodorants):** can cause temporary or permanent blindness  
**Salt toxicity:** salty water and food (crackers, chips, bacon) initially causes increased thirst, eventually leads to central nervous system depression, tremors and other neurological signs and death.

**Alcohol:** Depending on the type and volume consumed, signs include lethargy, lack of coordination, regurgitation and death.

**Nicotine:** Ingestion leads to depression, difficulty breathing and low blood oxygen; absorption can take place through the skin.

**Products containing cationic detergents:** examples include fabric softeners, liquid potpourri, germicidal substances and sanitizers.

**Avocado:** the toxic principle is unknown, but is found in the leaves, fruit, bark and seeds of some species. Effects are more serious in smaller birds, and usually are fatal.

**Mold:** often found in peanuts, especially those of poor quality; other nuts; bread, cheese, corn products, and droppings left on cage floors.

**Mushrooms.**