Common Injuries and First Aid for Birds

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Birds can hide illness for a long time. In the wild, they would become an easy target if they showed signs of weakness or illness. In our homes, birds still hide their illness. One of the easiest ways to monitor the bird's health is to weigh the bird on a monthly basis. If the bird is losing weight and you do not have him on a diet, he is probably ill. Some of the most common injuries or illnesses are listed below with at-home care instructions, which buy time to get the bird to the veterinarian.

Broken blood feather

Broken blood feathers can cause what appears to be a lot of blood loss. They are relatively easy to treat. At home, pack the broken shaft with styptic powder or flour. Apply minimal pressure with a gauze or telfa pad while traveling to the veterinarian. At the clinic, the veterinarian will probably pull out the bleeding shaft. If you have been shown how to do this, it is something you can do at home. The bleeding stops after the shaft has been removed.

Cat or dog attack

Handle the bird quietly and calmly to avoid adding to his stress. Keep the bird quiet and warm (to help prevent or treat shock).

If the wound is bleeding, apply direct pressure with a gauze, but do not restrict breathing. Transport the bird to your veterinarian immediately.

Check for broken bones. If a wing is broken, wrap both wings loosely to the body with gauze and then tape to prevent further injury from flapping the wing. Do not tape tightly or the bird will not be able to breathe. If other bones (skull, legs) are broken, do not attempt to treat at home as further damage may occur.

Anytime a bird is attacked by an animal, it should be taken to the veterinarian as soon as possible for an examination and treatment of wounds. Mouths and teeth carry a lot of bacteria which can cause nasty infections if left untreated.

Small wounds or abrasions

If your bird has a small, superficial, and nonbleeding wound not caused by an animal, clean the wound with betadine or chlorhexidine (Novalsan). Use a tweezers to remove any dirt or feathers. Then apply a small amount of antibiotic ointment. It should heal within a couple of days. Do not allow the bird to pick at it. In case of deeper cuts or wounds, seek veterinary advise as further treatment may be necessary.

Bleeding from the tongue

The tongue contains many blood vessels and if injured, may bleed profusely. Seek veterinarian attention immediately.

Bleeding toenail

Apply a styptic stick or powder to the toenail. The bleeding should stop within a minute or so. If the bleeding does not stop, take the bird to the veterinarian.

Breathing trouble

A breathing problem should be considered an emergency. If you notice that your bird is having problems breathing, first check the nostrils for blockage. If an external blockage is noted (such as with mucus), wipe with a damp cloth. Look for any other blockage such as seeds or dirt. (NOTE: The operculum, a small part of the birds anatomy inside of the nostril, could be mistaken for a foreign body, so have your veterinarian remove any suspected blockage.) After checking for blockage, contact your veterinarian or emergency clinic, gently transfer the bird to an carrier cage, and transport the bird to veterinary care.

Panting or open-mouth breathing could be caused by overheating due to fright, exercise, or environmental temperature. Overheated birds can develop heatstroke. In these cases, the bird may also hold its wings outstretched from his body, pant heavily, and collapse. Allow the bird to remain quiet in a cooler place. Mist the bird with cool water and have her stand on a cold wet towel. Do not cool the bird down too fast. Contact your veterinarian to determine if further treatment is needed.

Burns

Run cold water over the affected area for several minutes. Then dry the area gently with gauze and apply cold compresses. If the burn is severe or extensive, take your bird immediately to your veterinarian or emergency clinic. Burns may cause a bird to go into shock and need prompt care. Typically, antibiotics will also be prescribed to prevent infection.

Chilling

Provide a warm environment by supplying heat with a heat lamp or hot water bottle wrapped in a towel. Take extreme care to not burn the bird. Keep the temperature about 85-90ºF. Monitor the air temperature to avoid overheating. Determine the cause of the chilling. If it is due to illness or injury (shock), seek veterinary attention. If it is due to environmental conditions such as power outage or drafts, fix the problem or relocate the bird.

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Poisoning

If the toxin is inhaled such as fumes from a Teflon pan, remove the bird to a well-ventilated area, and contact your veterinarian immediately.

If the bird had external contact with a poison such as insect sprays, bathe the bird immediately and contact your veterinarian.

If the bird ingested a toxin such as a plant or a household cleaner, get the name of the toxin. Your veterinarian needs to be called immediately in all cases of possible poisoning. Any time poisoning is thought to be a possibility, the veterinarian or Poison Control Center will need to know the name of the toxin, the active ingredients, the weight of the bird, how much was consumed, when the exposure occurred, and any symptoms the bird currently is showing.

Summary

Any time an injury or illness occurs, the first thing to do is to prevent further injury. Then consult with your veterinarian or emergency clinic to determine what type of further treatment is necessary. Be prepared for emergencies by having a first aid kit for your bird readily available.

For more information on what is considered an emergency for birds, see Bird Emergencies: Contact Your Veterinarian When Your Bird Shows These Signs .

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