Feather Picking in Pet Birds: Causes, Treatment, and Prevention

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Feather picking is one of those problems that causes everyone to scratch their heads. It is rare in wild birds since they depend on their feathers to maintain body temperature, for courtship displays, and to fly away from danger and travel to food sources.

Causes of feather picking

A symptom of a disease or other problem, feather picking shows as a loss of feathers on the body and neck with normal feathers on the head. Behavior problems are the most common cause but the rule-out list includes the following conditions:

- Infectious - bacterial, viral, fungal, parasitic
- Metabolic - liver disease, kidney disease, air sacculitis
- Nutritional - inadequate diet, specific deficiencies
- Toxic - arsenic, cigarette smoke, nicotine on human hands
- Physical - improper wing trim
- Trauma - broken blood feather
- Allergic - food, cooking fumes, tobacco smoke
- Neoplastic - cancers, lipoma
- Endocrine - hypothyroid (decreased levels of thyroid hormones), hyperadrenocorticism (increased levels of adrenal hormones), testosterone responsive baldness
- Genetic - baldness
- Environmental - low humidity, lack of natural sunlight, small cage, overcrowding, dominance, change, inability to bathe
- Drug induced - praziquantel, fenbendazole
- Behavioral - boredom, frustration, breeding behavior, stress, attention-getting, anxiety, lack of sleep.
- Parasites

An ideal workup on a bird would include a thorough physical examination, lab work including a CBC, serum chemistry, and microscopic exam of several abnormal feathers. An in-depth history including housing (seeing pictures of the cage and its placement in the house if the cage is too large to bring to the appointment), diet, and activity should also be included.

Treatment

Treatment includes a combination of the following:

1. Treating any underlying disease such as liver or kidney disorders, parasites, or infection.
2. Changing the diet to decrease the amount of seeds fed and increase the amount of pelleted foods and vegetables. Change the way the food is fed: feed corn on the cob rather than kernels, give carrot sticks rather than small slices. Make the bird work for his food through foraging; he'll enjoy the challenge
3. Changing the environment to increase the humidity (daily misting, humidifier), add some natural sunlight, increase cage size, move the cage to increase or decrease social activity. Eliminate smoking in the house and smokers should wash hands before handling the bird to prevent the nicotine from getting on the bird. Leave a radio on 'easy listening' for the bird. Be careful about nature shows on television as they depict predatory-type actions that could increase the anxiety of the caged bird. Provide 12 hours of sleep in a dark and quiet environment. This may require moving the bird to a small "sleeping cage" in another room.
4. Increasing the activity for the bird to take up time during the day. Increase time out of the cage, increase the number of new and innovative toys, hide food in the cage and in toys. Work hard to prevent boredom!

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Do not just put an elizabethan collar on the bird and figure that it will stop the problem. The bird is going to be more bored and frustrated with the cone on than he was before. The problem needs to be identified and treated. Medications may be necessary and should be prescribed by an avian veterinarian after a thorough examination and workup.

Summary

If the reason for the feather picking is identified, it might be correctable. A large number of feather-pickers do so out of boredom and inadequate housing. Making changes can eliminate the problem. If the problem is not completely correctable, the owner may have to live with a less-than-perfect bird but should continue to try to eliminate the condition.

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