Fatty Liver (Hepatic Lipidosis) in Birds: Causes, Signs, and Treatment

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What is fatty liver disease?

Fatty liver disease in birds, also known as hepatic lipidosis, is a disease in which large amounts of fat are deposited in the liver. It is most common in budgies, cockatiels, Amazon parrots, Quaker parrots, lovebirds, and cockatoos. It is a very serious condition, and death may occur if treatment is not started early in the course of the disease.

What causes fatty liver disease?

There are many possible causes of hepatic lipidosis in birds. These include:

- High fat content in diet (all-seed diet)
- Too frequent feedings, or eating too much at each feeding
- Nutritional deficiencies such as biotin, methionine, and choline
- Thyroid disease
- Toxins such as lead, arsenic, carbon tetrachloride, chloroform, phosphorous, aflatoxins, and ethionine
- Hereditary factors
- Diabetes mellitus

What are the signs of hepatic lipidosis?

Birds with fatty liver disease generally have a sudden loss of appetite, are lethargic, and depressed. Many are overweight and the liver is enlarged due to the additional storage of fat. This results in a distended abdomen and difficulty breathing. They may have diarrhea and abnormal droppings (green in color). Birds may have poor feather quality. If the liver function is greatly decreased, birds may develop central nervous system signs such as seizures, loss of balance, and muscle tremors. Budgies may have overgrown, soft beaks. Some birds with fatty liver disease may develop few signs before they die suddenly.

How is fatty liver disease diagnosed?

Results of a physical examination, including the palpation of an enlarged liver often raise suspicion of hepatic lipidosis. The diagnosis can be supported through liver tests, radiography (x-rays), and confirmed through liver biopsy.

What is the treatment for hepatic lipidosis?

Birds with fatty liver disease must be placed on a low-fat diet which includes high quality pellets and fresh fruits and vegetables. It is sometimes difficult to get them to eat, so tube feeding may be necessary during the beginning of the treatment. They usually need additional supportive care such as supplemental heat and fluids. Additional medications, such as lactulose, may be given to treat or prevent central nervous system signs.

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