

Signs of Disease and Illness in Pet Birds: How You Know if Your Bird is Sick

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The presence of signs of illness in a bird is sometimes termed "sick-bird syndrome." This is because many illnesses in birds cause the same signs, and, by the time a bird shows signs of illness, the bird is really sick. Aviary birds, like other prey animals, hide signs of illness. Predators look for signs of illness or weakness when choosing their prey, so a prey animal needs to appear healthy, or it will be a sure target. By the time they are showing signs of disease, in many instances, the birds have become too weak to be able to disguise it. At this point, small birds, especially, have little reserve, and even handling them can put them into shock. This is why it is extremely important for bird owners to be aware of signs of illness in a bird, and monitor their birds at least twice daily for the presence of these signs.

If you notice any of the signs of illness in the list below, contact your veterinarian. Weakness, labored breathing, bleeding, injuries, collapse, seizures, or other nervous system signs are especially serious, should be considered emergencies, and need immediate attention.

Signs of illness in birds as characterized by changes in general appearance or stance:

- Huddled
- Sitting low on the perch
- Sitting on the bottom of the cage
- Hanging onto the side of the cage with his beak instead of sitting on a perch
- Head tucked under wing and standing on two feet
- Ruffled feathers (consistently)
- Weakness
- Losing balance, teetering, or falling off of perch
- Lumps or swelling of any portion of the body
- Picking at his feathers or body
- Trembling
- Not preening
- Harassed by other birds
- Eyes dull, sunken, or abnormal color
- Walking in circles
- Unusual smell to bird or droppings
- Drooped or elevated wing(s)

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Changes in behavior and general attitude that may be signs of disease in birds:

- Inactivity
- Decreased or changes in vocalizations or singing
- Drooping wings
- Collapse
- Seizures
- Increased sleeping or eyes closed
- Poor response to stimuli
- Changes in personality, e.g., more submissive, more aggressive
- Displaying juvenile behavior, e.g., begging for food

Changes in color, volume, consistency, and number of droppings indicating illness in birds:

- Change in color of the urates (the normally white portion of the droppings), urine (the normally clear portion), or feces (normal varies with species)
- Change in consistency: watery (increased urine), loose feces (diarrhea), hard feces (constipation) indicating illness
- Bloody droppings
- Undigested food in feces
- Decrease in number or size of droppings
- Increase in urates

Signs of disease in birds characterized by changes in appearance of the head:

- Discharge around the eyes and/or nares
- Squinting or half-closed eyes
- Overgrown or flaky beak

- Shiny black beak in a cockatoo (symptom of [Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease](#))
- Loss of symmetry (one area seems swollen or smaller compared to the other side)
- Redness or loss of feathers around the eye
- Discoloration of the beak
- Flicking or twitching of the head

Changes in feathers suggestive of illness:

- Ruffled or fluffed feathers
- Lost, misshaped, or broken feathers
- Decreased preening
- Wet, stained, or matted feathers on the head, vent, or other area
- Dull feathers
- Long or excessive molt, bald spots
- [Pulling or picking at feathers](#)
- Abnormal color or barring



Changes in legs or feet associated with disease:

- Lameness or favoring a leg
- Flakiness, crusting, or discoloration of feet
- Abnormal nail growth
- Shifting feet
- Swollen feet or joints

Signs of illness in birds associated with changes in breathing:

- Difficulty breathing
- Breathing with an open beak
- Tail bobbing when taking a breath
- Sneezing
- Discharge or crusts around the nares
- Wheezing or clicking sounds
- Exercise intolerance (heavy breathing after exercise, or inability to exercise)
- Change in sound of voice

Changes in eating/drinking/digestion indicating disease:

- Increased or decreased appetite
- Increased or decreased drinking
- [Vomiting or regurgitation](#)
- Straining to defecate or pass an egg
- Diarrhea
- Swelling in the crop area
- Weight loss (use a scale) and/or prominent keel (breast bone)
- Discharge from mouth
- Inability to pick up food or manipulate it
- Protrusion from the vent

Injuries:

- Burns
- Bite wounds
- Injury from flying into a window or other object
- Bleeding