

Evaluation of Bird Droppings-An Indicator of Health

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One of the most important indicators of the health of the bird is its droppings. Changes in the droppings are usually one of the early signs of illness in pet birds. You do not have to make the diagnosis yourself, rather the understanding that the droppings have changed in some manner should prompt you to seek veterinary assistance and identify a disease condition in an early state, which leads to a much better prognosis.

Ideally the droppings should be examined daily so that the character and number of the droppings can be properly evaluated. For example, a parakeet should have 30+ droppings daily, a cockatiel 20+ (yes, I know it seems like they have an endless supply!). A reduction in this number could indicate a decrease in eating or an interference with the passage of fecal matter. Paper on the bottom of the cage is ideal to allow for ease of viewing/evaluating the droppings. If corn cob or wood shavings are used you should have the means to check the droppings, as with these materials it is difficult to visualize the dropping as it becomes mixed in the substrate.

A normal dropping consists of three basic parts; a formed fecal portion, an off white urate (crystal) portion, and a liquid urine portion. The fecal portion is usually green in seed eating birds as seed imparts no color to the droppings so the green bile color predominates. However if the bird would eat foods other than seed the color of the fecal portion would change. For example, a bird eating pellets would have brownish droppings, a bird fed strawberries would have reddish droppings. The consistency of the droppings will vary with the variety of bird and its diet. A bird that eats fruit, vegetables and other succulent foods will have more watery droppings. Pelleted diets, in addition to causing brownish droppings, may also lead to increased water intake and hence more watery droppings with a less formed fecal portion and increased urine.

Droppings that have suddenly changed consistency and color could indicate disease. The amount of fecal portion should be checked. If the bird is not eating, there may be a scant fecal element or a dropping that is mainly urine with a small amount of bile. One of the important determinations to be made is whether or not the bird is eating. Even though a bird may appear to be in the food bowl it may not be eating. Is seed being hulled or scooped out of the cup onto the floor? Check for seed hulls in the food cup. Sometimes a bird may hull the seed but not ingest it. Hulled, uneaten seeds may be found on the cage floor. This is common in newly weaned parrots that have been taken off formula because the owner thought that the bird was ingesting the seed, but actually only "playing" with it

It is normal for a bird to "urinate" when it will pass only liquid urine and urate crystals with no fecal matter. However, this is only an occasional occurrence and if it predominates a problem exists. Remember that although a reduction in the number of droppings or amount of fecal portion indicates reduced food intake, it may also indicate interference with normal passage of fecal matter, such as with vomiting.

If there is hulled seed on the bottom of the cage, it must be determined whether the bird is regurgitating or vomiting. Regurgitation is a normal part of the courtship behavior. During courtship, regurgitated seeds may be seen on or near the mirror or toys. However, vomited seeds can be seen in sticky clusters throughout the cage-often adhering to the bars of the cage. Further evidence of vomiting is that the head feathers of the vomiting bird are pasted with vomitus, sometimes mixed with seed.

Watery droppings should be carefully evaluated to determine if they are due to gastrointestinal disturbance or increased urine production (polyuria). A somewhat formed fecal portion with an extremely watery urine portion or excessive urate portion may indicate a kidney problem or metabolic problem such as diabetes.

A more liquid consistency in the fecal portion of the droppings is suggestive of an intestinal tract infection. Occasionally, birds with an intestinal disturbance may have a grayish coating on the fecal portion due to excessive mucous. When a bird has pancreatic disease it has characteristic "popcorn" droppings which are bulky and off white to gray in color. Undigested seed or grit in the droppings are abnormal and could indicate a gizzard malfunction or a disease such as proventricular dilatation syndrome (macaw wasting disease).

Blood in the fecal portion of the droppings is usually from the cloaca or oviduct. Severe inflammation in the cloaca, ulcerations or tumors may be responsible. Blood may also be seen in female birds encountering difficulty passing eggs. In Amazon parrots and macaws, blood in the droppings could be due to cloacal papillomas, which are of viral origin. Other signs of this condition include straining to defecate and the presence of granulation tissue (appears almost like a strawberry) around the vent and in the cloaca.

The urate portion (urine crystals) should be off white in color. If the urates are yellow or neon green it may serve to indicate hepatitis. The neon green urates may be suggestive of psittacosis. Blood in the urine or urates (to be distinguished from blood in the fecal portion) are indicative of a kidney disturbance or toxicity, particularly heavy metal poisoning such as lead.

Conclusion

If you notice changes in the droppings contact your veterinarian. It may not always be a disease condition. If it does warrant an examination it is a good idea to bring the bird in its regular, uncleaned cage so that the droppings can be evaluated. If this is not possible, then bring in cage papers with the "abnormal" droppings. Early detection is the key.