

Know your bird's poop - and keep him healthy

By Cher Angelo

AS A BIRD OWNER, you change poopy papers every day. Probably the last thing you want to do is spend more than a few seconds on the chore. But before you dash out the door, consider this: getting better acquainted with your bird's droppings could help save his life some day.

Knowing what normal droppings should look like is as crucial to maintaining bird health as watching for physical injuries, providing a good diet and making sure the room is not too hot or too cold. Droppings that change in quantity, color, consistency or smell are one of the easiest ways to tell your bird is ill, yet many pet owners overlook this simple diagnostic tool. If detected early enough, many illnesses and health problems that birds otherwise mask can be treated or cured.

So grab a pen and notepad, pull up a chair beside the cage, and let's get you started with some basic information about droppings. Welcome to Poopology 101!

What's normal, what's not

Unlike cats and dogs, who often send clear signals they're not feeling well (usually on your favorite rug), birds drop subtler hints. Although not his most attractive aspect, the poop your bird leaves on the bottom of the cage is a hint you should not ignore. Droppings reveal a great deal about a parrot's general well-being.

By observing droppings every day, you can be your bird's proactive health guardian. You needn't spend hours poring over each masterpiece, but you should study your bird's poop enough to know what a normal one looks like. Once you know, a glance once in the morning and again in the evening will help keep your bird in the pink.

To make detecting changes easy, use plain newsprint, paper towels or clear wax paper in the bottom of the cage. Once you've graduated from Poopology 101, you can switch to regular print newspaper. Never use commercially sold cage bottom materials such as walnut shavings, corn cob shavings, or pellets. They make it impossible to monitor droppings - and they can harbor mold and bacteria that can make your bird sick, no matter what the manufacturers claim.

As a part of your poop patrol, you'll want to also keep an eye on your bird's vent area and the cloaca, the sphincter muscle that controls elimination. The vent area should always be clean and dry and the cloaca should remain fairly tightly closed, with no odd growths. Moisture, matted stools or extra tissue in the area warrant closer inspection by a vet.

What makes a dropping?

Droppings actually consist of three recognizable parts: feces, clear urine and a white urine called urates. You'll want to get a good idea of what each part looks like normally for your bird and monitor all three daily so you can report any serious changes to your vet. Generally, the feces part of the dropping should be green or brown. It should be solid and coiled like a snake, segmented or in pieces. The urine portion of the stool should be clear and watery. Urates should be an opaque white-beige crystalline material. Sometimes the urine and urates are mixed, creating a cloudy-looking material, but usually they are separate.

Not all changes in droppings indicate a health problem. For instance, different types of food can change the color of your bird's poop. Birds that favor pellets of a certain color may release feces that have taken on the same tinge. (The feces of birds who eat ordinary pellets are usually rust colored.) Strawberries may introduce a slight reddish color and blueberries, cherries and cranberries can turn fecal matter black.

Watery foods can make your bird's droppings appear looser than usual. Sometimes droppings may even be all liquid. However, as long as any fecal matter remains solid, watery droppings are not diarrhea. They are perfectly normal instances of polyuria, an increase in urine. In fact, long-time bird owners who feed a healthy varied diet including not only pellets but moist foods such as fresh vegetables, fruits, beans, pastas and cooked grains know that extra-wet droppings are the norm - they mean the bird is well-hydrated. You can expect to see an increase in urine also if your bird receives a scare or experiences stress, such as during a veterinary exam.

Birds on a seed-only diet pass dry and sticky or pasty-looking greenish-black feces, a reflection of malnourishment that eventually can lead to disease. Some species of parrots simply have odd-looking poop. For example, some healthy cockatiels have feces tinged a light green.

Poops can naturally vary in amount, too. Most birds hold their poop overnight until the next morning, when they release a larger-than-average dropping that may smell a bit, too. The exception to this rule are small birds with higher metabolisms such as cockatiels, who poop throughout the night and will have a pile of droppings beneath their sleeping perch the next morning.

Laying females have different bowel habits, too. They drink more water than usual and spend more time in the nest box, where they will hold their droppings. When they leave the box, they expel large, smelly droppings. Baby birds still on weaning formulas have large droppings, too, with urine composing a large portion.

So as you can see, there are lots of reasons for changes in droppings that you don't have to be concerned about. Now let's discuss some changes that could mean health problems, starting with the feces, which is the dark, solid part of a dropping.

Changes in feces

One possibly serious change is diarrhea, which appears as loosely formed feces that are not coiled or solid but watery. Some folks think that the extra-wet droppings that come after a bird eats greens or watery fruits is diarrhea, but it's not. Remember, an increase in urine because of diet or nerves is normal. With diarrhea, the feces themselves are watery.

Diarrhea is rare in birds and usually indicates a problem in the digestive tract. Sometimes it's caused by introducing new foods too quickly. Other times the bird has eaten spoiled food, a foreign object, or a toxin such as lead.

Antibiotics also can cause diarrhea. So can a bacterial or fungal intestinal infection, parasites such as giardia or roundworm, hernias, eggbinding, or disease. A bird with diarrhea often will have a "pasty vent," with fecal matter sticking to its behind.

If you think your bird may have diarrhea, or if you're just not sure, contact your veterinarian right away. Birds with diarrhea can become dehydrated and die within a very short period of time. Even in the absence of diarrhea, you should always be on the lookout for worms such as roundworm or hookworm in your bird's droppings.

Color changes

If your bird's red, gray or black feces can't be explained by a diet change, consult your avian veterinarian because these discolorations can mean something serious. Blood found throughout the stool usually means the bird is bleeding from the lower intestinal tract. It can be a symptom of intestinal infections, poisoning, warts, tumors, ingestion of foreign objects such as parts of toys, parasites, problems with egg laying or even eating cuttlebone or mineral blocks.

Two years ago, I noticed that my pied cockatiel, Merlin, had bloody stools every time she nibbled a piece of cuttlebone that had been placed in her cage by a previous owner. As soon as I removed it the bleeding stopped. Fresh black feces are a symptom of bleeding in the upper digestive tract.

If you suspect your bird is bleeding internally, never wait to see if it gets better. If you wait until the bird shows signs of weakness, it may be too late to save it.

Here are some other feces abnormalities you should speak with your vet about:

- ① **Dark greenish-black coloration.** This could be a symptom of liver disease.
- ① **Undigested food.** If you notice any bits of seed or pellets, be worried. These symptoms could mean parasites, an intestinal infection, proventricular dilation, or a disease of the pancreas or other internal organs.
- ① **Tarlike consistency.** If you notice that your bird is defecating blackish, tar-like feces, it could mean he's stopped eating. In small birds such as lovebirds or cockatiels, the feces may turn dark and pasty within 24 hours. It may take 48 hours or longer for larger birds such as African greys and Amazons to have these dark, dense droppings.
- ① **Change in volume.** If you notice an increase in the amount of feces in each dropping, it could mean your bird is not digesting its food properly or is having a problem laying. Very small, compact, and dark droppings could mean your bird is not eating enough due to an appetite loss from illness or an internal obstruction.

Changes in urine

The clear, watery urine part of a bird's dropping can change very rapidly according to diet, stress, excitement - or disease.

- ① **Increase.** If a normal change in diet or emotion can't explain a dramatic or prolonged increase in urine, it could be an early symptom of a metabolic disease such as kidney disease. Poisoning, infections and drug reactions can also cause polyuria.
- ① **Decrease.** A dramatic decrease in the urine part of a dropping can indicate dehydration, which can rapidly lead to death.
- ① **Pasty appearance.** Birds on malnourishing all-seed diets often have urine that dries into a white paste. Many people who feed seed diets often mistake this for a normal dropping.
- ① **Color changes.** Changes in the color of urine, normally clear, are pretty obvious and usually a sign of serious disease. The most common change is a yellowy or greenish tinge due to liver disease. Reddish-brown urine may indicate metal poisoning.

Changes in urates

A dropping's urates - the opaque white-to-beige portion - change much like the urine does when there's a health problem. A change in color to yellowish or yellow-green could indicate liver disease. Red or reddish-brown urates also can be a symptom of liver disease or lead poisoning. Some veterinarians believe yellowish green urates may also be a symptom of anorexia. If your bird's droppings seem to consist of more urates than usual, it may mean he is dehydrated.

Bubbly not good

Finally, you should watch for a couple of bathroom habits that could mean big trouble. For one, droppings that contain any bubbles or foam probably indicate an infection such as clostridium.

Another symptom of an underlying problem is straining. If you ever catch your bird having problems eliminating, get him to a veterinarian pronto. Straining could stem from a physical blockage caused by a growth or wart or another serious condition such as egg-binding.

Tests at the vet's

A lot of people ask me what kinds of fecal tests they should expect their vet to perform to determine general health. There are several tests your vet might use, depending on the bird's age and whether it seems sick or healthy. Vets tend to perform more tests on new birds than on older pets because there are more unknowns.

Before taking fecal samples for testing, your vet will ask you what recent stools have looked like and look at the droppings in your bird's carrier. This cursory visual exam will reveal general intestinal and liver health.

For a complete checkup, the vet will need to run what is commonly known as a gram stain on a fresh stool sample, usually one taken from the bird's cloaca using a swab.

Gram stains, which involve smearing a glass slide with feces and staining it to see bacteria under a microscope, can be used to check for bacterial and yeast infections that can make your bird sick. If the vet finds a problem, he or she will run an additional culture test on a separate plate to grow and identify the bacteria.

Once identified, the bacteria is transferred to another plate upon which tiny labeled discs using various anti-bacterial agents are placed. In about 72 hours, the vet will know which anti-bacterial agents will do the best job of killing the bacteria and can prescribe an antibiotic for your bird.

With vets now able to pinpoint the best antibiotics for infections in birds, just as they do for dogs and cats, there's no reason left for owners to rely on the shotgun approach of trying various pet-store antibiotics.

The vet can also have your bird's fecal sample screened for parasites, which would show up under microscopic examination. Finally, your vet can use droppings to screen for fungal infections, which can be difficult to eradicate unless caught early.

On the poop deck

Monitoring your bird's bathroom habits might not be the way you pictured spending your time as an owner, but it goes with the territory of responsible caretaking. After all, preventative medicine works for birds, too.

So put these tips into practice, and soon you'll be on your way to picking up your Poopology 101 diploma!