

ASPERGILLUS & ASPERGILLOSIS

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You've probably heard of Aspergillus and Aspergillosis, but may not be clear on what these terms mean. First, "Aspergillus" is the name of a common fungus that is naturally present in the environment. For most birds (and people) it causes no problems, but if too many aspergillus organisms are around and your bird has a poor immune system, then the illness "Aspergillosis" sets in. It is often fatal, causing severe respiratory problems. It can be transmitted from birds to humans and vice versa.

Aspergillus spores can be airborne, and are often abundant in corn cob litter. In a damp environment, like in the Northwest US, the problem is even worse. I always advise against using this type of litter since it is such a breeding ground for all types of fungus, molds, and bacteria.

Once Aspergillosis has taken hold, the lungs and air sacs fill with large white masses, causing serious breathing problems and further sapping the bird's energy and immunity. The bird will wheeze, or you'll hear a clicking sound and often see tail bobbing when the bird is at rest. Sometimes there is discharge or crustiness around the nostrils. A low grade infection can show as itchiness, frayed feathers, peeling beak or black feather edging on the wings. There is a blood test for Aspergillosis and it should be part of your bird's annual checkup.

Treatment is tough - the fungus is hard to kill and because of the weak immune system, there's often secondary infections as well. Birds on poor diets and living in unsanitary conditions are much more prone to this disease. In dealing with the disease, it's important to improve the diet, feeding lots of fresh veggies, fruit and using whole food supplements.

Cleanliness also needs to be a top priority, with daily cage cleaning and scrubbing of food and water dishes, as well as perches and toys. Birds on antibiotics for bacterial infections are much more susceptible to Aspergillosis, as well as other fungal and yeast infections. I advise supplying probiotics to birds who are on antibiotics, as well as feeding yogurt and acidophilus. In addition, feed foods rich in Beta Carotene, as Vitamin A is important for good health of the respiratory tract and skin. Yams, carrots, broccoli, red peppers and apricots are all great, as are supplements like wheat grass and spirulina. Boosting your bird's immune system by supplying a diverse, broad spectrum diet, ensuring adequate rest and daily exercise, and keeping your bird's cage and

supplies scrupulously clean will all help prevent this widespread fungus from grabbing hold in your bird. Don't forget the importance of regular "well bird" checkups every year, to catch any disease as early as possible, for the best success in treatment. Treating Aspergillosis with antifungal medications needs to be done under direction of an avian vet - it's not something to try and cure on your own!

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