

4-H CAGED BIRD PROJECT HEALTH SUPPLEMENT



Publication No. 4H369B

4-H Veterinary Science project members investigate the normal health of several animal species. It's important that you become familiar with the normal health of your project animals so that you can recognize when one of your animals isn't well. This caged bird project health supplement should acquaint you with basic caged bird common health characteristics.

Think about your finch, canary, budgie, or parrot. You are important to your bird because it's your job to keep them well and to know when they need veterinary care.

Recognition of the following normal characteristics will help you and your veterinarian work as a team to keep your pet bird in good health.

You should keep a record of any abnormalities which do occur. This record will be important as a case history when your veterinarian begins to formulate a diagnosis. You can create your own chart or use Wisconsin 4-H Publication No. 4H369A.

Your bird's **attitude** is a characteristic with which only you are familiar. Is your pet friendly and easy to handle? Are they a little on the vicious side? When does your bird enjoy singing or talking most? Watch for changes in your bird's behavior. The time of day or season of the year may affect his moods. A change in personality, sleepiness, seizures, circling, or paralysis may indicate a nervous system disorder.

Your bird's **stance** or **movement** is, of course, very different from that of other animals because a bird is able to perch and fly! Observe how your bird uses its limbs for climbing and perching. How do they curl their toes for grasping? How do they use their wings and body weight to balance? Normally birds have only four toes on each foot. A bird's neck bones are modified so that it can turn its head around for preening or spotting danger.

Learn to handle your bird properly. Frantic movement can lead to broken wings or other injuries.

Keep track of your bird's **weight**. "Eating like a bird" actually means eating an awful lot! Some birds must eat twice their weight daily because they burn up so much energy. So even a short

term loss of **appetite** could be very harmful to your bird. A good indicator of weight loss is your bird's keel-shaped breastbone or sternum. The muscles on the breast will rapidly become smaller and the keel will stick out if your bird is losing weight. Take note as to which seeds your bird prefers. Know the amount of water your bird normally drinks each day.

The **skin** of birds has many remarkable modifications - feathers, scales, claws, and preen gland. You should be familiar with the appearance of these structures in your healthy bird so they might serve as illness indicators. All birds can fluff their feathers to form air pockets which insulate them against the cold. Watch for a ruffled appearance. You may be housing your bird in a drafty area. Gently unfold your bird's wing. You should see all the flight **feathers**. Near your bird's skin are the insulating down feathers. Worn out feathers must be replaced. Shedding feathers is called molting. This a normal process. Failure to lose frayed feathers is a sign of illness.

Scales protect your bird's legs. These scales often become thick and pointed as your bird ages.

Your bird should have highly developed **eyesight**. The eyelids should be smooth, not swollen or crusty. There should be no eye discharge. The eye lining should be smooth and pink. The pupils should be the same size and shape. The cornea should be clear. White cloudiness indicates cataracts. The eye shouldn't bulge from its socket, as is common in parrots with abscesses around the eye.

Locate your bird's **ear**. It's behind and below the eye. Of course there are no heavy ear lobes! Check for discharges, swelling or cuts. If your bird appears wobbly, his inner ear balancing mechanism may have been injured.

An obvious characteristic for you to keep track of is your bird's **bodily discharges**. Your bird should not strain when defecating. They should have 25 to 50 formed, target-shaped droppings per day and no bleeding. "Urine" is excreted with your birds black or dark green feces. This creates the characteristic target-like shape. A decrease in

droppings may mean your pet is not eating as much as normal. Some regurgitation may be normal.

What about your pet's **voice**? Be concerned if your bird starts talking, chirping or singing less than normal. Perhaps he's unhappy. A lack of male hormones may cause a canary to stop singing.

You can estimate your bird's **heart rate** by placing your fingers against your bird's chest. The normal heart rate is so fast, it's difficult to count. Count the number of beats in 15 seconds and then multiply by four for the beats per minute. Canaries and finches average 500-800 beats per minute, budgies 300-500, small parrots 250-350.

Check your bird's **breathing rate**. Your bird's lungs expand when the chest expands. A large parrot should take about 30 breaths per minute and a smaller bird about 100 when resting.

Practice recognizing and recording many of these common health characteristics on your bird every day. When you need to contact your veterinarian, be prepared with a complete report of all the signs you have noticed. If you'd like further information of animal health, join the 4-H Veterinary Science project. You may use your pet bird as a Veterinary Science project animal!

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