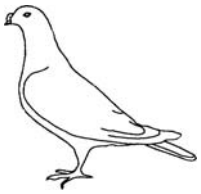
4-H PIGEON PROJECT HEALTH SUPPLEMENT



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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 pigeon project health supplement should acquaint you withcommon pigeon health characteristics.

Think about your racing, homing, meat, or exhibition pigeons. You are important to them because it's your job to keep them well and to know when your flock needs veterinary attention.

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

You should keep a record of abnormalities which do occur. This record will be important as a case history when your veterinarian begins to formulate a diagnosis. This is one reason why it is important to band your birds. 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. Who is your bird's mate? How do they relate to each other? Are they in their courting, egg producing, or squab rearing stage? Watch for changes in your bird's behavior. III health, time of day, or season of the year may affect his moods. Normally pigeon mates are paired to each other for life. However, if a mating is broken by death or separation, the birds will mate again with other birds.

A pigeon's normal **behavior** from courting to squab rearing generally follows specific stages. After mating, a pair will build a nest and lay two eggs, each one day apart. It's important that you provide more than one nest because pigeons will lay eggs in a second nest while feeding squabs in the first.

Egg incubation takes 17 days. The second egg laid hatches 24 hours after the first. Therefore, one bird is older and often dominates the younger.

Pigeons feed their young "pigeon milk" - a combination of the parents crops' secretions and partially digested feed.

The parent pigeons push their fat, full size, 4-week old squabs out of the nest to start another pair of eggs. The squabs become sleek and trim while learning to eat on their own.

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? Notice a pigeon has four toes on each foot. How do they use their wings and body weight to balance?

You can train your pigeon to stand more erect, to hold its tail upright, and to carry its wings and head properly by applying slight pressure to specific areas with a "show stick." Your bird may begin to "show" themself normally whenever someone comes near to observe them.

You will probably notice that each of your pigeons has its own characteristic flight pattern. Some breeds are known for their fancy maneuvers, loops, and tumbling.

Be aware of each bird's normal movements so that you will recognize any problems early.

Keep track of your bird's **weight.** As we've mentioned, squabs are normally fat until they're pushed out of the nest. Pigeons eat a lot of food but keep their stream-lined appearance by burning up a lot of energy. A loss of **appetite** could be very harmful to your bird. Take note of your pigeon's water intake. Pigeons drink by dipping their beak as chickens do. So, you must make sure that their water is at least 3/4 of an inch deep.

Bird **skin** has many remarkable modifications: feathers, scales, claws, and the preen gland. You should be familiar with the appearance of these structures in your healthy bird so they might serve as illness indicators should they become abnormal.

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 birds 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 is a normal process. Pigeons molt in the fall and produce very few young during this time. Failure to lose frayed feathers is a sign of illness.

Protective leg **scales** often become thick and pointed as your bird ages. This is normal.

Pigeons like to take baths once each week to keep their skin and feathers clean.

Your pigeons should have bright, alert **eyes.** They should not be watery or puffy - signs of a cold. The eye lining should be smooth and pink. The pupils should be the same size and shape. The cornea should be clear.

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 become injured.

An obvious characteristic for you to keep track of is your bird's **bodily discharges.** Your bird's droppings may become loose if you're feeding only pellets. A mixture of grain and pellets will correct this. Your bird excretes urine as a part of its feces. A decrease in droppings may mean your pet is not eating as much as normal. Regurgitation is normal in pigeons when they are feeding their young.

What about your pet's **voice?** Pigeons make beautiful cooing sounds. A male coos to his mate before breeding and may "talk angrily" to her to drive her into the nest.

You can estimate your bird's **heart rate** by placing your fingers against your bird's chest. The normal heart rate is fast and difficult to count.

Check your bird's **breathing rate.** Your bird's lungs expand when the chest expands.

Practice recognizing and recording many of these normals on your birds everyday. 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 on animal health, join the 4-H Veterinary Science project. You may use your pigeons as a Veterinary Science project.