

Feather Loss in Birds



This is a problem that can be caused by numerous factors:

- Mites, lice, bacteria, and fungal (yeast) infections
- Hormonal imbalances
- Dietary deficiencies
- Injury
- Underlying disease processes that secondarily affect the skin
- Behavioral causes
- Viral, bacterial, or fungal disease
- Psychological problems (boredom, etc.)

Some of these problems are easy to correct, while others are more difficult or impossible to resolve.

MITES, LICE, INFECTIONS

Often these problems can be solved with dusting <animal> with the appropriate insecticide or using oral medications. Diagnosis is made by examination of the feathers under the microscope, or by taking cultures of the feathers.

HORMONAL IMBALANCES

Sometimes improper activity of the thyroid gland, ovaries, or testicles can result in feather picking. Blood tests or biopsies may be needed for a confirmed diagnosis.

DIETARY DEFICIENCIES

A lack of protein, fatty acids, certain vitamins or minerals can result in feather loss and/or feather picking. Sometimes the fault is not in the diet, but rather the animal's ability to utilize the nutrients included in the food. A good history often provides clues as to the cause. Diet changes generally help.

INJURIES / UNDERLYING DISEASE

Sometimes an injury or illness (gout, tumors, arthritis) can cause a bird to hurt or itch. When he/she hurts or itches, he/she may pick at the area. Generally, these causes are suspected when only one area of the body is attacked. Often it is difficult to cure these individuals because the real cause is not treatable since the stress cannot be alleviated.

PSYCHOLOGICAL

By far these are the most common causes of feather picking. These types of feather pickers can be the most difficult to cure and have the highest incidence of recurrence. Common psychological factors are:

UNHAPPINESS

This can occur over such minor things as moving the cage to a different location or transferring the bird to a new cage. Arguments between family members can create stress feather picking as well as the disappearance of a favorite family member.

BOREDOM

Generally, this is due to lack of exercise, decreased attention, or no variation in environment. Changes in the cage or more attention can and usually does help. A companion bird may be the solution (although sometimes it will make things worse!) especially if the feather-picking bird is very "people oriented." Make sure that a new cage mate does not start to more issues than they help resolve!

LACK OF PRIVACY

Usually seen in new birds or established birds after a new addition is made. Usually the addition of a nesting box will reduce or eliminate the problem.

BAD HABIT

This is often the underlying cause, just as some people bite their finger nails or pulls their hair out. There are very frustrating cases to solve.

TREATMENT

Feather picking can vary widely but the method of stopping the behavior is initially the same whatever the cause. An ELIZABTHAN COLLAR (cone-shaped collar) is applied around the neck of the bird. It may take the bird several hours or days to adjust to the collar. During this time, the perches should be placed low in the cage and food/water should also be moved to within easy reach of the collared bird. Often the collar is left on the bird for 1-2 months, at a minimum! This is necessary to try to break the habit that the bird has developed. Often all feathers will not regrow for many months or until the bird goes through a natural molt. In severe cases, the feathers may never regrow or take years to come back.

Occasionally bitter liquids (i.e. Bitter Apple) can be sprayed on the affected area to try to dissuade the bird from picking himself. PATIENCE is very important when trying to solve feather loss problems in pet birds

SUGGESTIONS FOR FEATHER PLUCKING

- Fill the cage up to perch level with shredded news paper or paper towels. This will give your bird an outlet for his/her frustration and need to chew.
- Move bird from one location to another in your home. You can also put him/her in different cages during the day and night to vary his/her environment.
- Avoid air pollutants, such as cigarette smoke, fumes from non-stick cookware or insecticides.