

# All Creatures Animal Hospital

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## Medical Workup for Feather Picking Birds:

- Physical examination
- Complete blood count
- Biochemical analysis
- PBFD screening
- Polyomavirus screening
- Blood lead level
- Blood zinc level
- Fecal parasite analysis
- Feather cytology
- Skin cytology
- Skin biopsy
- Radiographs (X-rays)
- Thyroid screening

## Future Diagnostic Tools:

- Intradermal skin testing

## Behavioral Work:

- Environmental and behavioral survey
- Videotape evaluation of behavior
- Behavior consultation

# Feather Picking

## Causes of Feather Picking

While not always life-threatening, feather problems are highly visible to the owner and drastically alter the appearance of the bird. Of the skin problems we see, feather picking is the most common. Feather picking is actually a symptom of other problems and these causes must be found before the problem can be treated. Feather picking must also be distinguished from other feather disorders which do not involve self trauma to the feathers. Some birds are true feather pluckers (pull feathers out by the root) while others are feather chewers (bite feather in half). These problems should be distinguished because they may have different causes and treatments.

When birds are brought in for feather picking, the owner often reports that the bird has mites or some other external parasite. This is not usually the case. The only mite that is commonly seen in the skin of pet birds is the scaly face mite. This is usually seen in parakeets or canaries and causes crusty

lesions on the face and feet, it does not cause feather picking. Other external parasites are rare but include other types of mites, feather lice, and possibly avian fleas. A diagnosis of external parasites usually must be made by microscopic examination of a skin scraping.

Occasionally, other skin problems are noted. Bacterial, viral, or fungal in the skin infections can be either a cause or effect of feather picking. Allergic skin diseases have not been proven to exist in birds but allergic-like inflammation is not uncommon. Microscopic examination of skin cells, feathers, or skin biopsies may be needed to detect such problems.

Many times, feather picking can be linked with some internal disorder. Intestinal parasites, masses in the body cavity, liver disease, and other systemic diseases may be first noticed as a feather picking problem. These birds may pick feathers in a specific area of the body, usually over the affected organs. For this



Feather picking can mar the beauty of parrots and can indicate an underlying health problem.

reason, all birds that start to damage feathers should have a complete health evaluation by an avian veterinarian.

It is helpful to have in mind the general plan of attack for feather picking. Often successful resolution involves substantial financial and time commitments. It is rare that the problem is solved in one visit. Usually a few things are tried before an effective plan is accomplished. In many cases, everything possible is done and there is still no resolution of the problem. However, even in the cases that fail, most birds have a better quality of life when this approach is followed. The medical workup can be extensive and will usually include



Give any therapy 6-8 weeks to start working.

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*“Identifying the problems and eliminating them can sometimes be extremely challenging”*

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A comprehensive plan may allow more feathers on the bird and fewer on the floor

## Starting Therapy

Very often, when all other causes have been ruled out, it is determined that the problems stem from psychological disease or stress. Boredom, fear, lack of rest, poor diet, sexual frustration, and unsuitable environments may all contribute to this type of problem. Identifying the problems and eliminating them can sometimes be

extremely challenging. The owner often is advised to make several changes in the care and handling of the bird.

At the completion of the evaluation, a treatment plan will be formulated. The treatment plan should be instituted and continued for a minimum of 6-8 weeks before it is determined whether or not it is

working. It is useful to keep a log on the picking, feather regrowth, and other behaviors. Since this condition often involves multiple factors, if the first approach fails, an alternative plan can be used and may result in success.

Some of the recommendations that often improve or

## General Recommendations

- Socialize the bird. Allow the bird more time out of the cage. Talk to the bird, encourage play. Avoid excessive petting and cuddling.
- Relieve the bird of command. Birds that are in charge of the household are under a lot of stress. Establish dominance over the bird by using basic obedience techniques. We offer a bird obedience class in our hospital.
- If the bird is in a very busy household, it may need more sleep. Move the bird to a quiet room for a couple of hours in the afternoon and at night if owners stay up late.
- Give the bird some background sound. Leave on a television, radio, tape recording of owner, or other diversion.
- Rotate a variety of toys into the cage. Objects that can be safely torn apart are best (cardboard tubes, natural tree branches, leather strips, crumpled paper etc.)
- Bathe the bird more frequently to encourage normal preening behavior. Some birds will bathe in a shallow dish while others need to be misted. This is especially important in the winter. Do not dry the bird, let him preen dry.
- Don't smoke around your bird. If you are a smoker, wash your hands before handling your bird. Remove any other sources of odor or fumes. Change air filters regularly. Don't run your heat so high. Run a humidifier if it is very dry in the winter. Make sure only fresh, clean water is used in humidifier.
- Make sure that the bird is on a balanced diet. Ask us to recommend a diet. Feeding two meals a day instead of free choice will help in some cases.
- Chill out! Birds are very intelligent and are sensitive to their owners moods. An agitated or worried owner will cause stress in a bird. Some learn that picking will get them attention.

## Restrictive Collars

Some owners of feather picking birds request that a collar be placed to prevent the picking. While this may be part of the solution in some cases, it is not the cure to feather picking problems.

Birds become very stressed when restrictive collars are placed on them. Birds will react to the application of a collar in one of two ways, pouting or thrashing. Most birds will adjust within a day or two and collars can be used long-term in some cases.

The amount of damage being

done by the bird's picking should be weighed against the initial stress of collaring.

Situations that warrant collar application would include self mutilation of the skin, following a skin biopsy or other surgery, and cases where breaking the cycle of plucking is thought to be beneficial.

Different types of collars are used in different situations. Some are simple lightweight tubes that limit a bird's ability to bend the neck, others are cone shaped collars that in-

hibit the bird from reaching the affected area. Some combine both types.

It is very inadvisable to simply put the collar on a bird and go home. Birds should be monitored in a hospital cage free of bars or obstructions for 12 to 24 hours before sending them home. The bird's ability to eat, drink, and perch should be ascertained before release from the hospital.

Relief from itching should be provided if warranted. The cage should be examined for

## Medical Therapies

Any medical problem noted during the evaluation phase should be treated first. In some cases, medical therapy aimed at changing the hormonal or behavioral state may be used. Because the specific behavioral abnormality cannot always be determined, several treatments may be tried in sequence. Some of the medical therapies include hormones, acu-

puncture, antidepressants and narcotic antagonists.

The key to safe and effective treatment is to weigh the potential risks and benefits of a given therapy prior to use. A drug used for a severe plucker may not be warranted for a bird with mild feather chewing.

Always check with the doctor before trying something new. Your

veterinarian knows the specifics about your bird and any medical conditions present. Someone you "chat" with online doesn't have this information available. In their desperation, some bird owners will try things that they hear rumors about. This can be hazardous!

## Prognosis

Roughly half of feather picking birds will improve or resolve when diagnostic and treatment recommendations are followed. The factors most important in determining the success or failure are

the causes of the problem and the duration of the problem.

Birds that have been plucking for greater than one year have a much poorer chance of recovery

than those that began recently.

Even those that continue to pick benefit from our systematic approach. They are happier, healthier naked birds.

## Treatment Types

### Prescriptions Drugs:

*Antibiotics*

*Anti-inflammatory*

*Hormones*

*Psychoactive drugs*

*Pain control*

*Topicals*

### Over the Counter Drugs:

*Diphenhydramine  
(Children's Benadryl  
Allergy 12.5 mg/5ml)*

*\_\_\_\_\_cc \_\_\_\_\_X daily*

*Flaxseed oil*

*\_\_\_\_\_drops on food daily*

### Behavior Modification

*General recommendations*

*Counterconditioning*

*Exercise*

*Confidence games*



About half of feather pickers will improve or resolve with proper diagnosis and treatment

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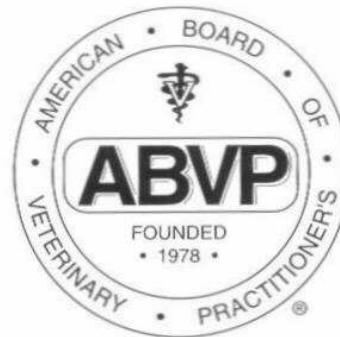
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*Quality medicine in a  
caring environment*



### **Our Mission:**

*All Creatures Animal Hospital is dedicated to providing progressive medicine in a caring environment for pets of all species. Through preventative medicine, client education, professional development of our staff, and advanced medical and surgical techniques, we hope to foster a strong and lasting bond with clients and their pets.*



Rechecks should be scheduled at 6-8 week intervals until a successful plan is devised.

## **Follow Up**

Rarely is a feather picking problem resolved in a single visit. Regular evaluation and modification of the treatment protocol must be done. Persistence and commitment are critical factors in the success of this endeavor.

Rechecks should be scheduled for 6-8 week intervals until a successful plan is devised. Medical problems noted on the initial evaluation will require rechecks until resolved as well. Any abnormal findings should be rechecked until they return to normal.

It is highly recommended to start a journal for the bird. Concise notations regarding your bird's behavior are helpful in determining the pattern

and sometimes the cause. The time, description, and severity of any behavior alterations should be noted in the journal. In addition, conditions present during the episode should be recorded.

Additionally, a photo record can help detect changes in the feathering that may be difficult to perceive because they are occurring so slowly. New photographs should be taken at about the same intervals as the rechecks.

If medications are used, keep track of any side effects that may occur. There are over 300 species of parrots alone. There are very few drugs which have been tested in all of them. Any problems should be reported to the

clinic as soon as possible.

Any bird that is on medications long-term will require periodic physical exams and laboratory evaluation to determine if any adverse effects are occurring.