

POSSIBLE CAUSES OF FEATHER PICKING

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One of the most frequently seen clinical problems in birds is feather picking or chewing. The first thing to think about is what sort of picking it is. Are the feathers completely pulled out or are they just chewed apart in the middle? Is the skin broken and mutilated (a classic cockatoo problem)? Are the feathers themselves normal looking, or are they picked at the gill base? Are the structure and color of the feathers normal, or are they dull, frayed or crossed with black bars that resemble a sergeant's stripes?

All of these descriptions are insights into the source or cause of the problem. The goal is to categorize: is the cause of the feather damage medical, nutritional, hormonal, sexual, psychological or due to feather mites?

I have listed mites last because despite being the least likely cause of the problem, it is the most common diagnosis made at the pet shop, following which of course you will be sold an anti feather mite spray. Just as for a dog with mange, a bird with mites will always have something else serious that is wrong with them. The mites are just a symptom. And still, I see so few cases of parrot feather mites, that it really should not be high on your list of considerations.

The most common cause of picking I see is intestinal yeast (meaning candida – a fungus) infection. Unfortunately this sort of infection is itself a symptom of a deficient diet, of soiled produce (fruit, vegetable, pasta), or dirty water, or simply due to a baby bird infection that was never cleared up. A yeast infection itches. It is as simple as that. But in addition to a sour belly, it can also cause an allergic reaction in the skin, which makes the bird feel dry and which causes it to pick and scratch. Eventually the colonies of yeast living on the walls of the intestines block food from being absorbed into the body. The bird becomes increasingly malnourished, and the skin becomes dry and flaky from insufficient levels of vitamin A reaching the skin cells. Dry skin is itchy. Once again the bird begins to pick at himself. You must speak to your veterinarian about improving the diet, supplementing vitamin A and curing the fungal infection. Another cause of flaky skin is the lack of bathing. Not all birds like bathing unfortunately. But a good to-the-skin wetting is very important every once in a while at least. Aloe sprays are not necessary, and may even coat the feathers inducing the bird to pick at these feathers with a film on them.

The important point to remember is to never let you bird become chilled following a bath. Teach him to accept a blow dryer, set on low and quickly fanned back and forth, so that the weather, time of day or air-conditioning setting does not have to be a factor in whether he gets a bath or not.

Medical causes of itches can include other allergies (such as to food or chemicals), skin infections, feather infections, or pain underneath the area being picked. These sources of pain can include abscesses, tumors, liver or kidney disease, or assorted bone problems. These conditions are straightforward and can be tested for,

This is not always the case when we are dealing with a little bundle of anxiety and nerves, or with sexual frustration (the pattern of picking here tends to be generalized, over easily reach areas). Medical explanations have to be considered and eliminated first.

Some birds are just easily upset, and in some cases are nervous wrecks, just as some people are. Birds have terrific memories and may constantly relive some past unkind experience; even if they only think they were treated roughly. On occasion, I find that a jealous child or sadistic spouse is teasing or threatening the bird in private, or that some other pet bird screams all day long or bullies the picker if they are caged together. Or that there is a perceived threat from the house cat or dog. In any case, we are dealing with a serious case of nerves, of birdie nail biting.

Although drugs can suppress behaviors such as anxiety "displacement activity", tranquilizers are not a cure, and should be used conservatively. Once begun, when can you hope to be able to stop? And what will happen when the drug is withheld? Failing to identify the cause means feather picking is sure to return. Likewise, collars to prevent picking do not necessarily solve anything and may be more torture than solution. I have seen cases where a few weeks with a collar successfully broke the picking cycle. Just do not regard them as the fast and cheap answer to this problem.

The desire to breed and nest can express itself as picking in a general pattern (nervous energy), or over the lower abdomen (mostly by females). The picking may be noticeably worse in late fall and winter (breeding season for most species), subsiding to some degree in spring and summer. Hormone treatments can help and are very safe. Ask your veterinarian about HCG therapy.

So the diagnosis requires an external and internal review of the bird's condition and nutritional status, a consideration of not only what foods are offered, but what foods are actually being selected off "the buffet table", a deworming (yes, parrots get worms too just like dogs and cats), possibly a feather follicle analysis, and a detailed consideration of the patient's history, home life and any quirks, patterns or tendencies that might give some insight into why your pet seems so troubled. Remember: it may be the only way your bird has found to get you to pay more attention to him.