

Veterinary Viewpoints

edited by
Amy B. Worell, DVM, ABVP-Avian
West Hills, CA.

Rhoda Stevenson, DVM, ABVP-Avian
Gainesville, Florida

QUESTION #1: We raise cockatiels as a hobby and recently had two ill birds. We had blood tests done and were told they had bacterial infections. We gave them the prescribed medications, Baytril and nystatin, and they both recovered very quickly. Now, my fiancé, who took care of the birds, is in the hospital with double pneumonia and psittacosis. He is on tetracycline.

I need to know if the two sick birds were the ones who had the psittacosis? Can another of our birds that seems healthy have passed the germ that caused my fiancé to get it?

Do I need to be on the antibiotic?

What about my Senegal parrot? She is kept in a separate room of the house.

Thanks for your help.

R. Stubbens, California.

ANSWER #1: Psittacosis can be carried by birds without any signs of illness. In addition to parrot family birds, many others can also carry the organism. Birds can develop active infection and/or shed the organism intermittently in nasal and ocular discharges and droppings. The disease has been found in some 129 species of native North American birds. One of your cockatiels could have been shedding. It is also possible that any of your other birds, including your Senegal, may be carrying psittacosis. The sick birds should be tested. Other birds should be tested. Any birds that die should be submitted for examination and testing. You should contact an avian veterinarian for advice on your birds, and a physician regarding your own health questions. Since psittacosis is a reportable disease, the physician

treating your fiancé would have contacted the health department and you will be contacted. You will need to treat your birds and your veterinarian will help you do this.

James M. Harris, DVM
Oakland, CA.

Answer #2: It is possible that the sick cockatiels had psittacosis as well as the bacterial infection. Psittacosis is caused by an organism called *Chlamyophila psittaci*. People can get this organism from the birds but there is also a human-to-human transmitted *Chlamydia pneumoniae* that causes similar symptoms. It is possible to run a blood test to distinguish between the two organisms, which would be important to determine if the birds are to be blamed. The birds can also be tested but there is not one test that is 100% accurate 100% of the time due to the nature of this organism. It has characteristics of both a virus and a bacterium. The viral characteristics include the ability to hide inside the cells so that it is difficult to detect when it is not being shed. This makes diagnosis a challenge. It is a good idea to test some of the birds in the household including the birds that were sick and if any area possible or your fiancé's test is specific for *Chlamydophila psittaci*, then all of the birds in the household should be treated. The treatment is 45 days of tetracycline or doxycycline. The birds that were positive should then be retested to be sure they are negative after the treatment. Treatment should not be instituted without good indication because antibiotic use can have side effects including overgrowth of yeast and resistant bacteria, but when needed, it works wonderfully.

ANSWER #3: Psittacosis, or parrot fever, is due to an intracellular bacterium. Recently the causative organism of this disease has been given a new name and classification. Once called *Chlamydia psittaci*, the new name of the organism is *Chlamydophila psittaci*, which is reflective of the more specific identification now afforded to this organism as additional and new research separates it from *Chlamydia*. It is thought that as more information is learned about this newly classified organism, that new diagnostic tests, treatments and vaccines will be developed.

The disease is such that birds can carry the bacterium for years without showing clinical signs. Then, when a stress occurs, the organism can be shed and the bird or others around it can become clinically ill. Hence, birds that seem to be healthy can carry the organism, and may have passed it on to your fiancé. As different tests for the organism, detect different aspects of the disease, there is no one test that will expose the organism all of the time. Often, multiple types of tests for psittacosis may need to be performed.

It is generally recommended that all exposed birds be placed on treatment for the disease for a period of 45 days. If positive birds are found, it is a good idea to retest for the disease after treatment ends. As the disease can be transmitted by fomites (such as on your shoes when you walk from one room to another), all birds in the household should be treated.

Consultation with your physician and the CDC (check out their website), can offer additional information to you.

Amy B. Worell, DVM, ABVP-Avian
West Hills, CA.

QUESTION #2: I have two canaries housed together for about two

months and they were very compatible. Recently, the female was constantly trying to make a nest in her seed cup. She would even use lettuce. I put a nest in the cage and they mated several times over the next several days. She laid four eggs, one broke on the floor of the cage and one in the nest.

After sitting on the eggs for two days, her behavior became very aggressive towards the male. I removed him from the cage as she had harmed him. She was extremely upset and abandoned her nest. I continued to keep them side-by-side in separate cages for a month. Now she wants to mate again. I put them together and after several hours together she started chasing him.

Should I find her another male or find him another female? Or is it possible for them to mate and then remove the male after she lays her eggs?

Timothy, Nevada

ANSWER #1: Pairing birds is like marriage, you don't know if it's going to work or not until you try it for a while. If it is not a compatible relationship, divorce is in order.

There are many reasons for breeding failures. Mismatched pairs, noise, and other distractions, inexperienced birds, location, type of nests and availability of acceptable nesting materials. (if the species uses it) are but some contributions to breeding failure.

I would advise new mates for the birds. Have the cage in a low traffic area. Give the birds a choice of nests and provide shredded burlap for nesting material. Be sure the birds are on a proper diet and let them work it out and practice the process. Have patience.

James M. Harris, DVM
Oakland, CA.

ANSWER #2: How large is the cage in which you have our canaries? It is possible that the cage needs to be larger, so he can get away from her

more easily. Possibly putting in another nest or some additional toys where he can hide from her when she gets in a "bad mood". The raising of chicks is better done by two parents: it is very hard on one parent. They may start to get along better with time, but sometimes they never get along (birds have personality clashes just like some people). If you want more birds then changing mates is probably a good idea. If you don't want more birds, then you can just keep them in separate cages side by side. That provides the company of the flock that they need without putting him at risk. She may still lay eggs: they just won't be fertile.

Rhoda Stevenson, DVM, ABVP-Avian
Gainesville, FL.

ANSWER #3: There are a number of solutions to your situation but I would suggest that you obtain a new mate for each bird as it "just is not working for them." Life is short even for birds, and there is no reason that each bird cannot enjoy a good quality of life on its own.

Amy B. Worell, DVM, ABVP-Avian
West Hills, CA.

QUESTION #3: I have a three-year-old budgie whose droppings have always varied from clear to liquid brown/reddish rod-like structures. He is active, happy, healthy, eats well. His roommate's droppings have always been normal, so I believe this is not a communicable disease but rather a structural/mechanical problem. Any ideas?

G. Hanover, Canada

ANSWER #1: without an examination it is not possible to define the reason that the birds droppings are not normal. It may be anatomical, pathological, or have a nutritional cause. I encourage you to contact an avian veterinarian to evaluate this.

James M. Harris, DVM

Oakland, CA.

ANSWER #2: It sounds like the bird has polyuria, which is a larger amount of liquid in the droppings than normal. Since the feces are well formed but in rod shape, it does not sound like diarrhea. This is an important distinction in diagnosing the problem. You did not mention what you are feeding the birds but that can affect the nature of the droppings. If you are offering fruits and vegetables or other foods that have high moisture content, that can cause the droppings to be more watery. Even though you are offering the foods to both birds, the one with the polyuria may be eating more of them. Other possible causes for polyuria include diabetes, kidney disease, liver disease, bacterial infection, and chlamydiosis. Even though the other bird has normal droppings, this does not rule out communicable disease. You should take your budgie to an avian veterinarian to have some testing done. He may well have a problem that is treatable.

Rhoda Stevenson, DVM, ABVP-Avian
Gainesville, FL.

ANSWER #3: Simply because you have taken the time to write and ask the question about your bird's droppings, indicates that you are concerned. Without the benefit of a physical examination and most likely some recommended diagnostic tests, it is hard to say what is going on with your pet. I would strongly suggest an examination with your avian veterinarian. If you do not have a veterinarian for your bird, you may want to check with bird owning friends for their recommendations, check with the AAV (Association of Avian Veterinarians) website, the phone book, or call local small animal vets in your area and ask to whom they refer birds.

Amy B. Worell, DVM, ABVP-Avian
West Hills, CA

