



Beak and Nail Care

Do I need to be concerned about my bird's beak and nails?

Most wild birds are naturally very active during the day and would normally encounter a huge variety of perching textures and perch sizes in their wild environment. This, along with ordinary preening and grooming, wears the nails down and helps maintain consistent length and health of the nails. Unfortunately, in captivity, the bird typically has perches of the same size and smooth texture. This leads to an imbalance in the rate of nail growth and the rate of wear. Without trimming, the beak and nails could become overgrown and flaky. Overgrown nails may become caught on things and cause injuries to the bird.

The beak is a multipurpose instrument used for eating, preening, grasping, climbing (like a third foot), self-defense, touching, playing and communication. It is capable of great strength and gentle touch. The beak is also constantly growing but tends to stay a relatively constant length because the bird is always wearing it down as it eats climbs and plays. After a bird eats you may see it wipe and clean its beak on an object in the cage such as a perch. This provides a wearing action for the beak. Your pet may also grind its upper and lower beak together, which further wears down the beak. This grinding of the beak often occurs when the bird is quiet or about to sleep, often in the later afternoon. Providing your bird with pet-safe toys and chewing activities will not only help wear down the beak, but will provide hours of entertainment for your pet. As a general rule, if a beak appears too long there could be a problem and it should be seen by your veterinarian. It is *not* advisable to ever attempt to trim the beak at home. A veterinarian familiar with birds will trim or grind the beak properly during regular health examinations as needed.

Can I trim my bird's nails at home?

Yes, but it is important to be careful when trimming the nails. The **quick** is the blood and nerve supply that grows part way down the middle of each nail (birds have a very long quick). In light colored nails it is visible as the pink area in the nail. In dark or black nails the quick is completely hidden. When cut, the quick may bleed profusely. Birds do not have a very good clotting mechanism, so be careful. If you choose to attempt nail trims at home then you must have a clotting agent or styptic powder on hand. A pet store or your veterinarian may have a safe pet product available. Powdered clotting agents seem to work better than liquids.

Small bird nails may be trimmed with a human nail clipper. Larger birds require a stronger dog nail scissor or guillotine type nail trimmer. The bird should be securely and safely restrained. The nail may be trimmed a little at a time to help lessen the chance of bleeding. It takes good judgment and practice to trim nails properly. If bleeding occurs, remain calm, restrain the bird safely and securely and use finger pressure to pinch the toe just before the nail. This will provide a tourniquet action while a clotting agent or styptic powder is pushed into the cut end. Cornstarch or flour may be used in an emergency but is *not* an adequate substitute under normal situations.

Your veterinarian can trim the nails safely during regular health examinations and is prepared to deal with any bleeding should it occur. Some veterinarians may use an electric grinder on the nails and beak of larger birds such as parrots, cockatoos and macaws.

What else can I do at home to help the beak and nails?

Do *not* use sandpaper perch covers as they do not keep the nails short and could cause terrible sores on the bottom of the feet. Natural washed branches from non-toxic trees make great perches. Trees such as elm, apple, plum, pear, magnolia, citrus trees, and poplar are just a few suggestions, Leave the bark on for texture and chewing. They should be of varying sizes and provide the opportunity for the bird to grip or grasp the perch, not just stand on with open feet. Birds are less likely to slip off, startle or fall from perches that they are able to grasp tightly. Varying sized perches provide better exercise for the bird's feet. For the larger birds, a single ceramic or cement perch may be a beneficial aid in safely wearing the beak and nails down. Cement or ceramic perches have been observed to cause excessive wearing of the beak if used as the only or most frequently used perch in the cage. For smaller birds such as a finch, budgie or cockatiel, cuttle bones, lava rock and mineral or iodized blocks may be helpful as a wearing surface for the beak,

Any changes in the rate of growth, color, texture or the way the beak or nail grows should be brought to the attention of your veterinarian immediately.