



Feather Problems

General Information

Feather loss is as much of a concern to bird owners as hair loss is to dog and cat owners. The feathers of a bird provide protection, insulation, flight, and visual signals to other pets. While feather loss in birds is usually not fatal, it is nevertheless disturbing to owners. Occasionally, feather loss can be the sign of a serious internal condition.

What causes feather loss?

Feather loss either occurs because the bird is truly losing feathers or because the bird is picking its feathers. If the owner can tell which is occurring, it often helps narrow down the possibilities of what is causing the problem.

Feather picking is often a behavioral problem, especially in the larger species of birds that are tightly bonded to their owners (such as cockatoos, macaws, and African gray parrots). However, feather picking can also be the result of a disease that causes irritation or pain for the bird.

True feather loss is always the result of a disease. Possibilities include viral infections (beak and feather disease), bacteria (such as a staphylococcal dermatitis), parasites (such as a Giardia infection in cockatiels), and internal diseases (liver or kidney disease).

How do you diagnose the cause of feather loss?

Because there are many causes of feather loss, often a multitude of diagnostic tests must be run. A good history (supplied by the owner) and a thorough physical examination are critical and may help narrow down the list of possibilities. Routine diagnostic tests include various blood tests, fecal tests for parasites, gram stains and/or cultures to check for yeast and bacteria, and radiographs (X-rays) to rule out various internal diseases. Often, a skin biopsy and skin culture are needed to get a definitive diagnosis. Sometimes, the tests fail to reveal a diagnosis and the doctor will need to make a clinical judgment as to the best course of therapy for your bird.

How is feather loss treated?

That of course depends upon the cause of the disorder. Beak and feather disease is a fatal condition that cannot be treated. Other skin and feather infections may

respond to antibiotics or antiviral medications. Parasites can be eradicated with an antiparasitic drug. Behavioral feather picking is difficult to treat; treatment may be attempted with behavior modification and certain types of drug therapy. Owners should be aware at the outset that even if a diagnosis is reached, it may be difficult to cure a bird with a feather disorder, especially if the cause is behavioral..