

BACTERIAL INFECTION IN PET BIRDS

Risk factors, prevention, and when to act

Bay Area Bird & Exotics Hospital

☎ 415-566-4359 ✉ reception@birdandexoticsvet.com

Birds can carry bacteria for a long time without symptoms, then appear to get sick very suddenly. Left untreated, it can lead to severe illness or death — which is why annual screening matters even for birds that appear healthy.

OVERVIEW

- Bacterial infections are a common cause of illness in pet birds — birds are susceptible to a wide variety of environmental bacteria and bacteria carried by mammals, including humans
- Poor nutrition, unsanitary cage conditions, and the stress of captivity all contribute — but even well-cared-for birds are at risk, since exotic birds are not well adapted to the bacterial environment of the typical home or aviary
- Every bird should be examined by an avian veterinarian **at least yearly** to establish a nutritional program and receive preventive guidance

MEDICAL TREATMENT

- Even the best care cannot always prevent bacterial infections — once present, treatment will usually be needed to address the disease
- Treatment options depend on the severity and type of infection — your veterinarian will determine the appropriate approach

Treatment	When It's Used
Prebiotic/Probiotic supplementation	Not enough research has been done in this area to know which products would be useful or demonstrably effective. For very mild infections or as a preventive measure for birds with recurrent problems if is unlikely to cause harm. Make sure to use a product tested by outside labs that prove they have inside what they say is supposed to be there
Course of antibiotics	Most commonly prescribed — the specific antibiotic is based on culture and sensitivity results
Cage disinfection	May be recommended alongside antibiotic treatment to eliminate environmental sources
Recheck examination	Always required after treatment to confirm the infection has resolved

- Treatment failure can result from antibiotic resistance, incomplete treatment, or persistent environmental sources of bacteria — all three must be addressed for long-term success



RISK FACTORS FOR BACTERIAL INFECTION

Diet & Environment	Husbandry & Exposure
Seed diets, especially if sprouted seeds	Wild rodents in the environment
Corn cob or walnut shell cage bedding	Dirty cage, food, or water bowls
Water containers or spray bottles not changed daily	Unwashed or improperly stored produce
Perishable food left out too long	Under-the-sink water filters or dirty filters
Kitchen sponges or rags used for cleaning	Exposure to toxins including heavy metals
Fish, reptile, or amphibian tanks in the same room	Direct contact with infected cage mates or other birds
Emotional stress or lack of sleep	Other underlying illness
Excessive use of disinfectant	Kissing people or facial grooming / “Hanging out” in the bathroom



WAYS TO PREVENT BACTERIAL INFECTIONS

Diet & Food Handling

- Feed a balanced diet of pellets and healthy table food — seed-based diets are a primary bacterial risk factor
- Wash produce before feeding, but not before refrigerating — store refrigerated produce in airtight containers
- Remove uneaten perishable food from the cage after a few hours
- Sprouts and sprouted seeds can be a source of bacteria and some birds appear to be more sensitive to them.

Water & Cleaning

- Change water bottles **daily** and soak them **weekly** for 30 minutes in a 1:10 bleach-to-water solution, then rinse thoroughly
- Spray bottles used for misting should be emptied and allowed to dry fully between uses
- Clean food and water bowls **daily** with soap and water or a dishwasher — do not reuse sponges or rags. If you do not have a dishwasher, soak dishes in a 1:10 bleach-to-water solution monthly to disinfect – you must clean the dishes prior to disinfection
- Avoid water from under-the-sink filters — change filters regularly per manufacturer instructions if used
- Boiling water for 10 minutes will kill bacteria if water quality is a concern

Cage & Environment

- Use paper products on the cage bottom — newspaper, paper towel, paper bag, or recycled paper products
- Change the cage bottom daily and maintain a clean environment throughout
- Use disinfectants only if directed by your veterinarian — routine disinfectant use can be counterproductive
- Eliminate wild rodent exposure — rodents are a significant source of bacterial contamination
- Keep fish, reptile, or amphibian tanks in a separate room and wash hands after handling

Handling & Interaction

- Allow **10–12 hours** of uninterrupted sleep nightly and some daytime privacy — stress and sleep deprivation compromise immune function
- Do not allow your bird to roam unsupervised or chew on paint or other structural materials
- Avoid exposure to birds of unknown health status
- Avoid contact with dogs, cats, and other mammals and their food and water bowls
- Prevent your bird from kissing people's mouths or grooming nostrils — human oral and nasal bacteria are a real transmission risk
- Keep the toilet lid closed at all times, especially when flushing
- Wash hands after blowing your nose or using the bathroom, and before handling your bird

Schedule a yearly veterinary exam to screen for health problems — even birds that appear completely healthy can be silent carriers. Early detection is the most effective tool available.

Questions? We've heard weirder ones. Call us.

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