

## New bird and annual health checks

Acquiring a new bird is an exciting time for any parrot owner. However ensuring the health of any new bird is of vital importance, both to ensure you bring home a healthy pet, but also to protect the health of any existing feathered friends in the house.

Compared to other birds parrots are susceptible to a particularly high number of infectious diseases. While mainly transmissible to other birds and parrots – some diseases are also zoonotic (meaning they can be transmitted to humans), with some like psittacosis being particularly concerning for human health.

Bringing a new parrots home risks passing infection to any existing birds (or potentially vice versa). Boarding facilities, birds shows and any other bird encounters carry similar risks. Simply keeping birds in separate cages, or even separate rooms will not provide sufficient protection – as infections can be carried in feather dander, or aerosolised secretions spreading infection throughout a house or aviary block.

The best way to mitigate the risk is to ensure new birds undergo health checks and disease testing before being mixed with the existing flock. In addition to this routine ongoing health checks can ensure continued health status of the collection and detect any underlying problems before they develop. Screening tests should be chosen based on the wishes and expectations of the owner and the birds to be tested. When discussing health checks with owners we always weigh up the risks associated with handling, restraint and on occasions anaesthesia against the benefits of performing the recommended testing. The history (birds age, species, previous location etc), and the physical examination findings should be taken into account when selecting diagnostic tests.

Health checks may include physical examination, haematology (blood count) and blood chemistry, disease testing, faecal examination, radiographic and endoscopic examination if necessary. Some of these tests such as faecal exams are cheap and non-invasive (and consequently performed regularly in all birds) whereas full endoscopic examination for example requires anaesthesia and is understandably more costly. We will typically request owners withhold food for a short period prior to presenting a bird for health check – this is so the crop is empty in-case anaesthesia is required. Ask your vet for advice on this when booking the appointment.

The new bird health check is also an important time for me to give any husbandry, management, and health advice to owners. In general, young parrots are much more adventurous, and accepting of change. They are going to be much more amenable to diet change compared to a parrot that has been fed the same food for years. If we can ensure management is correct from the beginning it can help ensure health and fitness for a life which can span several decades.

Parts of the Health Check:

History:

Taking a thorough history is always time well spent. The history will include information about the new bird, existing pet birds at home, the home environment and husbandry. It will give an opportunity for the owner to discuss any concerns.

Experienced bird owners are generally very astute in recognising signs of disease. Where these skills have not been developed owners should have training in recognising signs of illness, particularly during quarantine but also when checking animals within the existing collection. Birds should be assessed at least once daily, typically performed during routine feeding procedures. Attention needs to be paid to noting normal behaviour, so that abnormalities are noted as soon as possible. In addition to health, behaviour and attitude of the bird, the parrot owner should also evaluate the enclosure for signs of bleeding, feather loss or other signs of a traumatic episode. Fresh droppings should be observed for colour, consistency and amount of faeces, urine and urates. Sick birds should be identified and treated in conjunction with the responsible vet. The vet can help make the decision whether sick birds are potentially infectious and need to be isolated

#### Physical examination:

The single most important part of a health check is a thorough examination. Initially this will be hands off observation in the consult room followed by a full hands-on examination. Parrots are masters at hiding signs of disease – and will often act normally at the start of a veterinary consultation even when ill. With time as they adapt to the environment subtle signs of illness start to show. The examination will be short but thorough to avoid any undue stress associated with handling – particularly in a new bird which may not have been used to handling. Methods are adjusted to meet the needs of the individual bird and circumstances. It is very important to minimise any adverse experiences for the bird in the vets – and for as much of the time to be as positive as possible. For birds that resent being examined there are training steps available that can desensitise a bird to the gentle restraint and physical exam.

#### Faecal exam:

Faecal exams are cheap and non-invasive. An assessment of the appearance, consistency and colour of the faeces will be made. The sample will be tested for parasites, and a microscopic examination for abnormal bacteria or fungal organisms will be made.

#### Routine Blood count and Biochemistry:

These blood tests will commonly be offered as part of a health check in both new and existing birds. Given parrots ability to hide signs of disease – abnormalities identified on blood work can help ensure an early diagnosis. In healthy birds it allows us to record their normal blood values which we can then compare back to if the bird ever develops illness.

#### Sexing:

Historically endoscopic sexing was employed to identify the gender of a bird. While allowing visualisation of the gonads this procedure is surgical (all be it minimally invasive). Fortunately, modern DNA methods are now routinely available to identify bird sex, preventing the need for a surgical procedure. Endoscopy however is still a very useful technique to investigate poor reproductive performance.

Disease testing:

There are a large number of diseases for which we can screen parrots. The most important are potentially zoonotic disease such as *Chlamydia psittaci* (psittacosis), and highly infectious virus's like Psittacine beak and feather disease (Psittacosis), polyoma virus and herpes virus. There are also tests to detect borna virus which is known to be the cause of proventricular dilatation disease.

There are many reasons to have disease testing performed:

- To ensure the health of a new pet bird
- To prevent risk of disease transmission to owners
- To prevent transmission of serious disease to existing birds
- To monitor the health of the current 'flock'
- Requirement before holiday boarding

Different tests require different samples to be collected. Faeces, swabs (mouth, throat, nose, and vent), and blood tests are the most commonly taken. There are typically a number of different tests available for the same disease – each with their own strengths and weakness's with some being more accurate then others. An experienced avian vet will help an owner select the tests which will be of greatest benefit and most accurate.

Imaging:

Imaging covers a wide range of modalities for looking inside a bird. Ultrasound, xrays, CT scans and endoscopic examination can all be performed. CT scans can be particularly useful screening test as they show far greater detail, particularly of the respiratory system and in some cases can be performed without anaesthesia. It is also far less invasive then traditional methods such as endoscopy. Imaging will sometimes be part of routine screening – particularly for valuable birds, but is most commonly suggested if abnormalities are identified on clinical examination or blood work.

Outcome:

Following a health check results will be given to the owner. Some results may be available on the day – others (particularly disease tests) may take a few days to be returned. It is important the new bird remains in quarantined until the all results are back. Mixing birds while still waiting for results risks transmitting a yet unknown infection to the existing collection. If abnormalities are identified treatment options or management suggestions will be provided, and follow-up appointments scheduled if needed.

Annual health checks:

It is routine practice for pet dogs and cats to attend the vet at-least once a year at the time of annual vaccination. This provides an ideal opportunity for a hands-on examination. Because parrots do not typically get vaccines without an annual health check it is possible for birds to go several years without visiting a vet. The annual health check provides an opportunity for a vet to examine your pet parrot, and will help identify any subclinical (without clear symptoms) problems before they develop. Signs of disease are far more subtle in birds than other commonly kept pets, and early identification can ensure the best treatment success.