

Feather Loss: Cause and Treatment

Normal Feather Loss and Replacement—Molt

Molt is normal feather replacement. Feathers are normally replaced about once per year, a few feathers at a time, but never to the point where patches of bare skin are seen. It's normal to see a few feathers from time to time at the bottom of the cage. During molt of the larger wing and tail feathers, it may appear that there are more feathers lost than usual. Feathers must be replaced regularly for good health and function.

Abnormal Feather Loss

Abnormal loss can eventually result in the loss of enough feathers to reveal underlying down feathers and/or bare patches of skin. Abnormal loss of wing feathers in a flighted bird impairs the ability to fly. Abnormal loss can be caused by the following:

1. Removal of feathers by other aggressive cage mates, or due to trauma.
2. Disease of the actual feathers, feather follicles and skin. In some cases, new ingrowing feathers emerge abnormally, fall out, or are pulled out.
3. Feather destructive behavior, such as shredding, clipping or removal of otherwise normal-appearing feathers. Determination of the cause of this kind of feather loss can be difficult. While some cases may be truly linked to behavioral abnormalities, many are actually a result of an underlying medical problem. An examination and complete diagnostic work up are the first steps towards determining the cause.

Traumatic Feather Loss

Feathers may be removed by other birds or by household pets such as dogs or cats. Feathers can be caught in toys, cage doors or other objects and be lost as the bird struggles to free itself.

Feather Destructive Behavior from Diseases Not Directly Related to the Feathers

Unfortunately, in many cases, self-removal of feathers is due to causes that have nothing to do with the skin, feathers follicles or the feathers themselves. While the exact mechanism isn't certain, some diseases may result in discomfort or even pain. As pulling out a feather is actually painful to a bird, self-removal may mask other underlying pain or produce an abnormal response that isn't fully understood. Many experienced avian veterinarians report that correction of underlying disease conditions results in lessening or cessation of feather destructive behavior. While a great deal of research remains to be done on this topic, underlying diseases that have been anecdotally reported as linked to feather pulling include: exposure to toxins, chronic reproductive stimulus or reproductive disease, liver, kidney and heart disease, and others.

Behavioral Abnormalities

Some feather destructive behaviors may be due to boredom, poor socialization or anxiety. Proper housing, provision of toys and teaching birds to "forage" for food is important for any bird. A consultation with a qualified avian behaviorist may be beneficial.

Actual feather plucking may have behavioral origins as well. However, as pulling feathers out is actually painful to birds, this represents a serious behavioral abnormality. All attempts must be made to rule out underlying medical disorders before diagnosing any bird with a strictly "behavioral" feather disorder.

Diseases Affecting the Feathers, Feather Follicles and Skin

Diseases of the feathers, follicles and skin themselves include: viral disease (polyomavirus and Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease), parasitic diseases (mites, lice), and bacterial or fungal diseases of the skin and/or feather follicles. Feathers may emerge abnormally and fall out or be removed by the bird. Parasitic, fungal or bacterial diseases may cause itching and result in feather removal.

Nutritional deficiencies may affect feather quality, and could lead to feather loss. Extreme malnutrition may result in inability to make new feathers. Old, tattered feathers are eventually lost and may not be replaced.

Birds may remove feathers that are contaminated with sticky substances that can't be removed during normal grooming. Some propose that tobacco smoke or other airborne pollutants may cling to feathers resulting in self-picking.



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Long Term Feather Loss and Regrowth of Feathers

Feather pulling can result in permanent damage to feather follicles. In some cases, even if the causes of feather pulling is determined and corrected, damaged follicles may be incapable of growing new feathers. Therefore, some areas of bare skin may be permanent.

Prevention

The feathers are often a reflection of the general well being of the bird. As there are many causes of feather damaging behavior and feather loss in birds, including underlying illness, a thorough work up is important in order to formulate a treatment plan and attempt a cure.

For More Information

For more information on birds, ask your veterinarian for copies of the following AAV Client Education Brochures:

- Basic Care
- Behavior: Normal and Abnormal
- Avian Chlamydiosis & Psittacosis
- Feather Loss
- Feeding
- Health Exam
- Injury Prevention and Emergency Care
- Signs of Illness
- When Should I Take My Bird to a Vet?

Looking for an Avian Veterinarian Near You?

For help finding a qualified avian veterinarian in your area, go to www.aav.org and click "Find a Vet."

Online Resources



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AAV offers bird clubs a monthly news bulletin for use in their newsletters. Clubs may contact the Publications Office (pubs@aav.org) for information.

