

THE HEARTBREAK OF FEATHER-PICKING

“Why does my beautiful bird pull his feathers out?”

Feather-picking can be mild, moderate, or severe. Mild may just be chewing a few feather tips, with moderate including removal of feathers, and severe resulting in self-infliction of wounds. This severe form is termed “Mutilation Syndrome” and can result in damage of skin and muscle that may lead to nerve damage, hemorrhage and infections. The simple answer to the “Why?” is STRESS! But how can my bird --- that I dote on and give everything he wants --- be stressed? Part of Webster’s definition of “stress” includes “a physical, chemical, or emotional factor that causes bodily or emotional tension and may be a factor in disease causation.” Using this definition, we must consider physical as well as psychological causes.

Physical causes of feather-picking:

Infectious causes

- 1) Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease (PBFD) --- This virus leads to death of the feather follicle leading to discomfort and loss of the feather. There is an accurate blood test to determine the presence of this virus.
- 2) Polyoma virus --- Feather loss from infection with this virus is more common in younger birds with older birds being the carriers of the virus. There is an accurate test to detect this virus.
- 3) Chlamydia as well as many other fungal, bacterial, or parasitic agents that cause external or internal disease resulting in itching or internal discomfort with the bird “attacking” the area of discomfort.

Non-infectious causes

- 1) Toxins
 - a) Heavy metals (lead, zinc, copper). Blood tests and X-rays help determine these.
 - b) Nicotine from second hand smoke
- 2) Metabolic --- Heart disease, kidney disease, liver disease. Blood tests and X-rays are needed to help define these.
- 3) Nutritional – Nutrition affects ALL organ systems and can exaggerate any dysfunction. The skin and feathers account for the largest organ system of the body and imbalances in Vitamin A, amino acids, calcium trace minerals Vitamin B and excess fats have been shown to influence feather conditioning.
- 4) Hormonal – Sexual maturity and “breeding seasons” can lead to frustration and feather picking. Although this cause has been found to account for not more than 25% of feather picking cases, it is one reason to try to avoid the inappropriate “pair-bonding” phenomenon and supply a healthy “flock” association with humans.

Psychological causes of feather-picking

The mind takes in environmental experiences and attempts to make logical sense out of them. When the logic mechanism cannot make sense of a particular influence, it can short-circuit causing various aberrant behaviors including feather-picking. **Birds are not little people in feather suits.** Trying to define what may be causing anxiety in a creature that cannot verbalize its frustrations is difficult to say the least. Maintaining a good balance between general health, nutrition, social interaction, and normal feather care is important.

Diagnosing the Causes of Feather Picking

The goal is to rule out the common causes in a logical fashion. Determining the presence or absence of a physical cause is of paramount importance. Blood tests, viral testing, heavy metal testing, and X-rays are important elements in diagnosing causes of feather-picking. Diet and nutritional history can be very helpful. A diary of events directly preceding the onset of feather picking can be very revealing. Early intervention is important as the longer a bird feather picks the less likely it is that the behavior can be stopped ---- no matter the initiating cause.

In Conclusion

Feather picking is NOT a simple situation. It is not a diagnosis. Like coughing it is only a symptom of an underlying problem. In order to address the problem successfully, a proper definition of the underlying cause is required. This process takes time, patience, medical testing, and a close working-relationship between owner, veterinarian and patient. The earlier the problem is recognized and addressed the better the prognosis.