

PROTECTING YOUR PET BIRDS FROM HOUSEHOLD DANGERS

INTRODUCTION

Everyone knows that when you have a toddler you must “child-proof” your home to ensure his safety. The same is true for those of us who have pet parrots and other birds in our homes. With the curiosity and mischievousness of a two-year-old, a beak designed for destruction, and the ability to fly, parrots in our homes can get into loads of trouble very quickly. Below are some hints on how to keep your pet parrot happy, healthy, and out of harm’s way.

Don’t Let Your Bird Chew on Household Items

Birds’ beaks grow continuously, and chewing is a natural behavior. While chewing branches and leaves in the wild provides birds with exercise and entertainment, chewing on household items can be unsafe and even deadly. Below is a list of materials that can be toxic if ingested. This list is not exhaustive, however, so err on the side of caution and only let your bird chew on bird-safe toys.

Lead

Lead toxicity occurs in birds when the toxic metal lead is accidentally ingested. Lead is soft and has a sweet taste which makes it palatable. In the wild, birds become poisoned when they accidentally swallow lead shot or lead fishing sinkers. In our homes, common sources of lead include stained glass, lead solder, paintings, paint from old houses, curtain weights, costume jewelry, and fishing sinkers. Old Venetian blinds and linoleum may also contain lead. Unfortunately lead can also be present in poorly designed bird toys, or in metal objects given to birds to play with. Symptoms of lead toxicity include regurgitation, lethargy, weakness, red urine, seizures, muscle cramps, paralysis and death.

Zinc

Zinc toxicity also occurs in pet birds when zinc-containing items are ingested. Common sources of zinc include galvanized wire cages, metal hardware, and pennies minted after 1982. Symptoms of zinc toxicity include lethargy, weakness, diarrhea, regurgitation, and increased water consumption.



Tobacco and Marijuana

Tobacco and marijuana can be very harmful if ingested. Nicotine poisoning is a real concern anytime a pet has access to cigarettes, chewing tobacco, nicotine gum or patches, or e-cigarettes. Symptoms of nicotine poisoning include tremors, vomiting and diarrhea, seizures, and coma. Marijuana intoxication can also occur, with symptoms of depression, weakness, loss of balance, and seizures. Be especially careful with edible products, such as nicotine gum or food containing marijuana derivatives, as what makes them tasty to us will also make them tasty to pet birds. As with other ingested toxins, seek veterinary care immediately if you suspect your pet has chewed on or eaten any of these products.



Common Plants

Some common plants can be toxic if ingested. There are reports of birds being poisoned after eating Crown vetch (*Coronilla varia*), *Rhododendron* species, and *Kalanchoe* species. Plants known to cause damage to the heart include oleander, yew, lily of the valley, and foxgloves. Acorns and oak leaves contain a type of tannin that causes liver damage. Other commonly seen plants that are toxic include Lantana, lilies of the valley, lilies, rhubarb, dumb cane, and umbrella plant. This list is not exhaustive, so make sure to check whether a plant is toxic or not before allowing your bird access to it.



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Other Toxic Materials

Other toxic materials commonly found in homes include rodenticides, insecticides, and medications. Be sure to supervise your bird while it is out of its cage. If your bird has ingested any of the products listed above, or is acting ill, seek help immediately from an avian veterinarian.



A special mention must be made of **electrical cords**. Some parrots will chew through electrical wires if given access to them. This can result in burn wounds to the beak and tongue, or in more serious internal damage. Electrical cords that carry AC current or high voltage are more dangerous than those that carry DC current or low voltage.

Avoid Toxic Fumes

The avian respiratory tract is extremely sensitive to inhaled chemicals. Products that do not cause problems in people or other mammals can be highly toxic to birds. Below is a list of some common products that are not safe to use around birds. If your bird breathes in these chemicals it can result in symptoms ranging from mild illness to sudden death.

Polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE)

Polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE) is one of the most common causes of airborne toxicity in pet birds. This product is found in nonstick cookware, air fryers, irons, covers for ironing boards, self-cleaning ovens, and heat lamps. When PTFE is heated above 536° F (280° C), it decomposes into acidic gases that are toxic when inhaled. Symptoms of PTFE toxicity include trouble breathing, incoordination, weakness, coma, and death. When exposure to PTFE is known, move birds to a well-ventilated space and if showing any symptoms, seek emergency medical treatment immediately. Even with prompt medical attention, birds who inhale PTFE fumes often die. Humans can also be affected after exposure to vaporized PTFE, although they are less sensitive to its effects. Preventing exposure to PTFE is recommended by using other cooking products in homes with birds such as ceramic pans. Additionally, making sure one is cooking in a well-ventilated area and that birds are not in the same air space during these activities is recommended.



Smoke

Smoke is another airborne toxin that is harmful to birds. All smoke, whether from cigarettes, marijuana, engine exhaust, burning food, self-cleaning ovens, or malfunctioning furnaces, can hurt your pet. Carbon monoxide, hydrogen cyanide, acidic fumes, and particulate matter in smoke cause symptoms similar to PTFE. Symptoms may take several hours to appear.

Nicotine in tobacco and tobacco smoke is very harmful. The birds most likely affected are those that have been chronically exposed. Clinical signs include reddened eyes, inflamed sinuses, trouble breathing, and cracked and irritated skin. Long term exposure can cause permanent damage to the respiratory tract as well as cardiovascular disease. Ingestion of nicotine products can be rapidly fatal. If you smoke cigarettes or e-cigarettes, please do so outside your home. Wash your hands well prior to handling your bird.

Other Airborne Toxins

Other airborne toxins include air fresheners, hair products, nail polish, scented candles, aerosols, gasoline fumes, paints, polyurethane, mothballs, fumigants, drain cleaners, aerosol insecticides, and cleaning products such as ammonia and bleach. Overheated and melted plastic dishes in the microwave have also caused the death of parrots. If painting or other home repairs are being done in your home, your birds need to be moved far away from any fumes, preferably to another location altogether.



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Be Careful with Human Food

Just because you can eat a food without experiencing medical problems does not mean this is true for your birds. Chocolate and caffeine, two products often enjoyed by people, are toxic to birds and can cause heart arrhythmias, anxiousness, and seizures. Avocados are also toxic to many birds, and can cause the lungs to fill with fluid and the heart to fail. Plants in the *Allium* family such as onions and garlic are toxic to many species, and ingestion can lead to anemia and liver damage. All seeds from fruits in the *Prunus* family (including cherry, peaches, apricots, plums) and from fruit of the *Malus* (apple) family contain small amounts of cyanide. While an occasional apple seed will not harm your pet, it is best to avoid intentionally giving fruit seeds to your birds. Salt toxicity can also occur, so make sure that your pet bird is not fed highly salted foods. Finally, do not feed your pet xylitol as this artificial sweetener can potentially cause a fatally low blood sugar in birds, dogs, and other pets.



Only Use Safe Toys

While no toy is 100% safe for all animals, it is important to hedge your bets and select toys that are made of nontoxic materials. Untreated wood, jute rope, and palm fronds are safe products commonly used in bird toys. Acrylics and stainless steel, which are too hard to chew, are also safe products. Avoid soft plastics that your bird can chew, and soft metals that bend. And be sure to supervise your bird with its toys; if your bird is swallowing parts of a toy, even a nontoxic one, it can block the intestines and is unsafe.



Use Extra Caution if you have a Flighted or Free-Roaming Bird

While it can be fun to have a flighted feathered companion and flight is a wonderful enrichment for our pet birds, extra caution is necessary as they can quickly get into trouble. Birds can fly into windows, mirrors, or ceiling fans and hurt themselves. Open doors and windows lead to the perils of the outdoors, such as predators and becoming lost. Sources of heat such as stoves, heaters, and fires can cause serious burns. Doors, which make a nice place to perch, can crush toes if they swing shut. An open toilet bowl, pot of water, or even a partially filled glass of water can pose the risk of drowning. Birds that aren't flighted but roam free in the home are also at risk. Dogs, cats, and other birds can injure your bird, and birds on the floor can be accidentally stepped on or closed in a door. Unsupervised birds can also harm themselves by chewing on fabrics, walls, or other objects. Having an increased awareness of your surroundings and potential dangers will go a long way toward keeping your pet safe.



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We love our pet birds, and know that you do, too. Now that you are aware of the dangers that exist in our homes you can prevent many common injuries and intoxications. Keeping your birds healthy, happy, and safe is what the AAV is all about!

AAV: Setting a Standard in Avian Care Since 1980

Avian medicine is a distinct and very specialized field that requires extensive training, advanced skills, and facilities specifically designed and equipped to treat and hospitalize birds. The Association of Avian Veterinarians was established to provide veterinarians with this special education, and to keep them up to date with the latest information on bird health. The AAV holds an annual conference on avian medicine and publishes the peer-reviewed *Journal of Avian Medicine and Surgery*. AAV also makes annual contributions toward avian conservation and sponsors studies advancing the understanding of avian medicine.

For More Information

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

- Avian Chlamydiosis and Psittacosis
- Veterinary Care for Your Pet Bird*
- Basic Care for Companion Birds*
- Behavior: Normal and Abnormal
- Caring for Backyard Chickens
- Digital Scales
- Feather Loss
- Feeding Birds
- Injury Prevention and Emergency Care
- Managing Chronic Egg-laying in Your Pet Bird
- Signs of Illness in Companion Birds*
- Ultraviolet Lighting for Companion Birds
- When Should I Take My Bird to a Veterinarian?*
- Zoonotic Diseases in Backyard Poultry*

**Available in multiple languages. All others are available in English only at this time.*

Online Resources

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Our website, www.aav.org, offers a Find-a-Vet tool to help pet bird owners locate avian veterinarians around the world. We also offer a variety of resources such as basic bird care instructions and more. Visit the website today!

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Association of Avian Veterinarians
PO Box 9, Teaneck, NJ 07666



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