

FEATHER PLUCKING

Self-mutilation is the most commonly presented behavioural problem. It presents as nail biting, toe biting, feather chewing and feather plucking. In severe cases, birds may also go off their food and lose weight.

Normal preening may develop into an exaggerated and aggressive chewing and pulling of the feathers in cases of neurosis. It has been suggested that the bird may be chewing the feathers because it develops a taste for them.

Causes (in decreasing order of frequency): -

1. Boredom and/or neurosis. This is similar to the biting of fingernails seen in humans.
2. Poor quality feathers due to malnutrition, poor husbandry or hormonal imbalance are often plucked by birds and this may be the stimulus for further self mutilation.
3. Folliculitis due to bacterial or mycotic agents may result in feather plucking. A stained smear of the feather pulp from the follicles may yield useful information.
4. Feather mites are often thought to be the cause by the owner, but are rarely found.

When presented with a suspected feather plucker it is important to examine it properly to rule out infection or nutritional problems. A diagnosis is possible on the clinical history, cage size, social interactions and the presenting pattern of feather loss.

Self-mutilated feathers, especially at the bottom of the cage, must be distinguished from the normal growing and feather sheath removal. If the feather plucking is psychological then the feathers are not deformed or discoloured and are lost from the areas that the bird is able to chew. Initially, flight and contour feathers are plucked, but eventually the bird may be bald except for the head.

Ectoparasites

External parasites are relatively rare in pet birds, especially in caged birds. Nevertheless, the sale of avian ectoparasites sprays continues to increase. Practically every feather picking bird will have been subjected to a thorough spraying by the owner before being presented to the veterinarian. Unfortunately, this action will further dry out and irritate the underlying skin, thus furthering the bird's discomfort and pruritus.

Investigation

- Due to the complex and multifactorial nature of feather plucking it is important that this condition should always be investigated thoroughly and in a logical fashion.
- It is vital to decide whether the bird is plucking because of a physical illness or a neurosis. The majority of cases are related to diet or husbandry.
- In any case, the investigation will usually proceed as follows: -
 1. Clinical history; *diet, environment, health status.*
 2. Clinical examination; *distribution of plucking, feather examination. Is the bird ill?*
 3. Blood testing; *assessing general health. Is there a physical illness, e.g. thyroid disease, hypocalcaemia, zinc poisoning?*

4. Behavioural history; *when does plucking occur, where does plucking occur, is owner present, is the bird bored, is it properly trained?*
5. Feather examination, including culture; *looking for signs of mites, signs of nutritional problems, 'stress marks'. (Culture should look for yeasts and fungi as well as bacteria.)*
6. Faecal analysis; *Chlamydia, parasites, giardiasis in cockatiels.*
7. Virology; *psittacine beak and feather disease, polyomavirus.*
8. Skin biopsy and allergy testing; *limited use at present time.*
9. Radiography and endoscopy; *useful if blood samples indicate physical disease, e.g. evidence of heavy metals, aspergillosis.*

Treatment

The use of an Elizabethan collar is often helpful, not only for treatment, but also to assess feather follicle activity in cases of doubt. However, the suspected causes of the neurosis should be corrected. The aim should not be just to gain feather regrowth, but to prevent this behaviour from recurring or being replaced by another vice.

Treatment will generally include the following: -

1. An Elizabethan collar should be fitted. This is often useful as a first approach as it prevents further mutilation while the original cause of the neurosis can be dealt with, as outlined below. The collar, ideally, should be clear so that the bird can see almost normally; it must also be large enough to prevent the bird from reaching the feathers. Psittacine birds do not like Elizabethan collars, but they work well. It is advisable that the birds be initially hospitalised for a few days to allow them to adapt to the collars and ensure that they are able to feed normally. Collars should be left in situ until feathers have regrown, which is usually about 2 months.
2. The plane of nutrition should be improved. Particular attention should be paid to the protein, calcium and energy levels to allow the replacement of the feathers.
3. The owner must try to give more attention to the bird, either directly or indirectly.
4. The environment should be changed frequently by moving the cage around the house or placing it in an area where there are distractions. Toys should be given to occupy the bird. A more suitable cage should be provided where necessary. The cage should be sufficient to allow exercise. Use of natural branches for perches allows something for them to peck at. If the bird is tame then it should be allowed out of the cage.
5. In order to give some privacy and security to the bird, a 'hide' should be provided. A dark box is suitable.
6. The photoperiod should be altered to a more normal level of 8 to 12 hours per day. Often birds are kept in the lounge and subjected to as much as 18 hours of light per day.
7. Birds should be allowed to bathe, or should be sprayed daily. This is especially important in African Grey Parrots, which tend to get very dusty and often become overzealous groomers due to this.
8. If the above list does not eliminate the problem, then it may be necessary to attempt control by the use of drugs. This may involve the use of tranquilisers or hormone supplementation.
9. If bacterial folliculitis has been diagnosed then appropriate antibiotic therapy should be administered.

10. Some sources say the introduction of a cage mate may help inhibit the problem, others have found that this often results in the new parrot being shown how to feather pluck, resulting in two bald birds!

NB: - If you see the bird plucking its feathers you should not run in and scold the bird as this may be seen as a 'reward', and thus just serves to reinforce the negative behaviour. Often the bird is feather plucking because point 3 is not being provided, and by shouting at the bird you are giving it the attention that it craves. Instead, punishment by placing in a dark cupboard or by covering

the cage can be attempted. Initially this should be for only 3 minutes, but subsequently the length of time can be increased up to 15 minutes. The use of a water pistol is also helpful. Use of high-pitched alarms is not advised as it just serves to scare the bird and worsen the neurosis. Prior to initiating your own punishment strategies, however, it is advisable to consult with your veterinary surgeon!

REFERENCES

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