Why did my bird suddenly die?



One of the most heartbreaking scenarios is when a client calls to inform us their beloved companion bird suddenly and unexpectedly passed away. Usually this phone call comes with some of the most difficult questions: Why? How could this have happened? Did I miss the signs of illness? Is there a problem in my home? Of course, there is no way for us to answer these questions over the phone, but we can offer suggestions and options to figure out what may have happened. The goal of this article is to discuss some common signs of illness, possible toxins/dangers in the home, and most importantly what owners can and should do in the event they have a sudden death occur at home.

Signs of illness

Most people recognize the most obvious signs of illness in pet birds such as vomiting/regurgitating, loss of appetite, or the typical "fluffed up" appearance and sitting at the bottom of the cage birds show when they are very ill. But some signs of illness can be difficult to recognize such as subtle behavior changes, change of habits, vocalization changes, or variations in color or consistency of droppings. This is why it is so important to know what is normal for your bird: what time does he/she normally go to sleep? What is its favorite perch? How often does it speak/vocalize? How many droppings are normal for it to make in a day? What foot does he/she normally eat with? Never assume that a subtle change in your bird is normal as it could absolutely be a sign that something is wrong. Here is a brief list of some obvious and not so obvious signs of illness in birds:

- Decrease or increase in appetite
- Increase in urination
- Increased drinking
- Feather or skin changes
- Discharge from the eyes or nostrils
- Vomiting/regurgitating
- Sneezing or wheezing
- Limping
- Fluffed feathers
- Tail bobbing while breathing
- Sudden behavior changes including biting or screaming
- Decrease in activity level
- Voice change
- Change in flight ability
- Spending more time on the bottom of the cage
- Weakness or inability to perch
- Overgrown or discolored beak
- Change in droppings: color or consistency
- Straining to poop
- Wing or wings drooping
- Diarrhea
- Weight loss or weight gain
- Blood on the bird or in the cage/on perches

Any of these changes, or any other changes recognized in pet birds, should be brought to the attention of an avian veterinarian to determine whether or not it is a sign of something more serious.

Possible toxins/dangers in the home

Pet bird anatomy creates some specific challenges when keeping them safe in our homes. Their wings give them the ability to fly, enabling them to get to places we may not be able to see and places we may not have prepared to be "bird safe". Their beaks are designed to be able to rip, chew, and crush natural substances which enable them to get at and chew on things around the home which are often unsafe. And their respiratory system is made up of chambers called air sacs as well as lungs that push air throughout the entire bird's body. This efficient bellows-like system is what enables them to fly long distances, but consequently makes them more sensitive to airborne toxins than other pets or humans. The following is a list of some common and not so common dangers and toxins to be aware of in your home that can cause an unexpected death in a bird. It's important to realize that there are certainly other dangers at home, but this list is about things that may not be so obvious (like a whirling ceiling fan) and can cause a bird to die without much warning.

- Teflon and other non-stick cookware coated with PTFE (watch out for self-cleaning ovens that are coated with PTFE or Teflon bake ware being stored in the broiler part of the oven) that is overheated.
- Plug-in air fresheners
- Incense
- Gas leaks
- Scented candles (unless you are using soy wax)
- Most aerosol cleaning products and household cleaners
- Oil-based paint
- Polyurethane (new or recently treated hard wood floors and furniture)
- Chewing on lead paint (remember that regardless of new non-leaded paint, old homes often have lead paint layered beneath the new layers).
- Chewing on solder used in stained glass and many mirrors
- Chewing on electric cords (birds enjoy chewing these)

- Ingestion of avocados
- Chewing on toxic plants (such as lilies)

What to do if a bird dies unexpectedly at home

There is no way to make this process easier, but perhaps being prepared and having a plan can at least minimize the pain associated with losing a beloved companion unexpectedly.
The first thing to do is determine if there is something happening in the home that could endanger your other pets or you, such as a gas leak, and address this by calling the proper emergency services and/or ventilating the home. Often when non-stick cookware gets overheated releasing the toxic fumes, small birds such as canaries or parakeets will die first and if you have other larger birds you may be able to get them out of the house or ventilate the house before they succumb. If there is no sort of obvious toxic gas or fume (see list above) you should call your local avian veterinarian. Unfortunately, we do not have the ability to tell you why your pet died over the phone. And if you have other birds at home, or if you plan on obtaining new birds, it is very important to determine if there is either a danger in your home that you are unaware of, or if your bird was harboring a disease that could have been transmitted or could be transmitted to a new bird.

Diagnostic necropsy

The best way for your avian veterinarian to give you information and answers is if you bring the deceased body for a necropsy (like an autopsy for a human). The body should be stored in the refrigerator (it is fine to wrap it in a small towel or bag) and brought to your veterinarian as soon as possible. Tissues that have been frozen or that are old (over 48 hours) become autolyzed (degraded) and rendered useless on a diagnostic level, so if you wish to have a necropsy to determine cause of death please be prepared. It is also important to understand that a gross necropsy, the first part of the examination where the doctor performs a physical exam of the body, inside and out, is often not diagnostic. A doctor may not be able to tell you if your bird died from a toxin or other kind of illness that manifests on a microscopic level. A gross necropsy will only determine if the cause of death was from something on a larger scale or visible with the naked eye such as egg binding, tumors/masses, severe heart disease and atherosclerosis, or a respiratory blockage (such as a seed stuck in the trachea). In order to have a full diagnosis the tissues would need to be collected and sent to a pathologist for histologic evaluation. Often these services carry a large price tag and an entire study of every organ can be over $400. Unfortunately, there is still the possibility that even with sending the entire body to a pathologist, we may not be able to pinpoint an exact cause of death. You should be prepared that despite our best efforts, animals are organic living things and sometimes medicine does not hold all the answers.

Lastly, there is the question of body care. If you do not wish to pursue a necropsy to determine the cause of death, owners are often lost as to what to do with the body. Most people where we are located in New York City do not have back yards to bury their pets. While there are many public parks where people bury small animals, it is illegal and you may be taking a risk by doing this. Other options include:

- keeping the body wrapped and frozen until a time when you are able to take it to a place for burial (many people wait until visiting family or friends with yards)
- purchasing a large houseplant and burying the body in the soil as a memorial in the home if the body is small such as a parakeet or cockatiel
- bringing the body to a veterinary hospital where most have options for either communal cremation (pets are cremated together and remains are buried/scattered at the crematorium location) or private cremation (remains are cremated individually and returned to you in an urn).
- pet cemetery services- There are some pet burial services where plots can be purchased for pets. Information for these services is generally found either online or through your veterinary hospital.

At this point, clients sometimes ask us what they should do with the cage, accessories, and foods they have. Having these reminders around the home can be very painful. We generally encourage clients to keep these items in case they decide to adopt, rescue, or purchase another bird. If the cause of death is determined to not be infectious, they can keep everything for a new companion. If the cause of death is found to be something another bird could become infected with, instructions on what should be discarded and what can be disinfected and reused should be given by the veterinary staff. If clients decide they do not want to pursue post-mortem cause of death, our recommendations would be to discard all cage furnishings and food, disinfect the cage if it will be reused, and wait 3 months before adding a new bird. And if clients decide they do not want to keep anything, we encourage them to donate food or items that can be disinfected to needy shelters, wildlife rehabilitators, or rescue organizations.

Our Location



Office Hours- Appointment only

Main Office - closed for lunch 1pm-2pm daily.

Monday:	9:00 am-1:00 pm	2:00 pm-7:00 pm
Tuesday:	9:00 am-1:00 pm	2:00 pm-7:00 pm
Wednesday:	9:00 am-1:00 pm	2:00 pm-7:00 pm
Thursday:	9:00 am-1:00 pm	2:00 pm-7:00 pm
Friday:	9:00 am-1:00 pm	2:00 pm-7:00 pm
Saturday:	9:00 am-1:00 pm	2:00 pm-7:00 pm
Sunday:	9:00 am-1:00 pm	2:00 pm-7:00 pm

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