Avian Basic First-Aid

The following tips are a synopsis of information presented during several avian first-aid workshops. They are intended as general guidelines only. They are in no way a substitution for proper and immediate veterinary care. Be sure to practice restraint occasionally and remember to watch the breathing of your pet. Please be sure and have your veterinarian's phone number so you can contact them quickly in the event of an emergency.

Bleeding from the nails, "blood feathers", and lacerations

The primary goal in any bleeding episode is to stop the blood loss as quickly as possible. Clotting time for most healthy birds will be around 60 seconds or maybe less. Pressure is the old standby and very reliable--sometimes as a first means of defense, sometimes by default when other ideas are not working.

Nails:
It is easy for a nail to get broken, especially if they are a little too long. It is also easy to "quick" a nail if using traditional nail clippers. For larger birds, I recommend using a dremel. Have someone well versed in its use show you how. Several things may work to help the clotting of a bleeding nail. They are:

1) styptic powder (I fill tuberculin syringes with styptic to facilitate application)
2) silver nitrate sticks
3) flour
4) corn starch
5) bar soap (Ivory--less chemicals overall)

Prolonged bleeding should alert to the possibility of a true clotting problem with your pet.

"Blood Feathers"

While new feathers are growing in, they have both an artery and vein running through them. It is often that a clumsy bird such as a baby or a bird prone to thrashing such as a cockatiel will break a new feather. These feathers can bleed profusely (enough in some birds to be life-threatening) and can look like they are bleeding even more as the bird splatters blood with its movements. The best method for stopping most of these occurrences of blood loss is to have handy a pair of hemostats, fine needle nosed pliers or other instrument to provide you with a good grip and pull the bleeding feather. This is done by grasping the shaft of the feather above the tear. Hold firmly and pull straight out in the direction the feather is growing. Do not jerk or pull out at an angle as this may cause further tearing. Make sure no skin is in the grip so no skin tearing will occur. If you have problems still and need assistance, hold pressure if possible and get to a veterinarian for assistance. Peroxide works great when trying to locate which of several blood stained feathers is bleeding. Make sure you know proper restraint to decrease

chances of injury to yourself and your bird! And yes, unfortunately, this procedure does hurt, but if the feather is left in place, the scab could dislodge and further bleeding occur.

Other lacerations

The primary goal is to control the bleeding. Often pressure is the best approach. After the bleeding is stopped, do not immediately try to flush or clean the wound. The clot could be washed away and bleeding restart. Wait 30-60 minutes before doing anything. This will also allow your bird a rest after presumably a great deal of stress. Once the clot has had time to organize and the small vessels time to constrict and seal, you can proceed. When in doubt, do not put anything in a cut or wound that you would not put into your own eye! Many chemicals can cause cellular (tissue) damage and delay healing. Some acceptable solutions are: water (warm not hot!), 1% chlorhexadine (Nolvasan), or betadine diluted to a "weak tea" colored solution. Be sure to contact your avian veterinarian to determine what, if anything, else needs to be done. Large cuts, wounds, or blood loss amounts need to be seen ASAP! All trauma induced by animal attacks is a "right then" emergency. Sepsis (systemic infections) can occur in a matter of 12-24 hours and can be deadly. Do not put any oil based cream, ointments, or other solutions on your bird. These can destroy their thermoregulatory abilities.

Fractures

Fractures most commonly occur in the wing and leg bones of birds. Fractures are not usually fatal unless other conditions or complications are involved. The wing and leg bones of birds are hollow and when they break, are likely to splinter into several pieces. These pieces often have sharp edges that could cause considerable soft tissue damage that may be more problematic than the fracture itself.

Your goal is to stabilize the fracture and get the bird calm and in a location that will prevent further injury.
Your first aid kit should be stocked with the appropriate materials for immobilization of the fracture. A basic orthopedic principle is to stabilize the joint above and below the fracture site for the best stabilization.

Figure Eight Bandage

Place the injured wing in the normal resting position near the body. Starting inside near the top edge, roll your bandage material around to the top of the wing and diagonal to the opposite edge. Roll around the underside of the wing in a straight line to the opposite underside edge. Then bring the bandage out and roll diagonally upwards and directly opposite of the starting point. This will produce an X shape on top of the wing and a == configuration on the underneath side of the wing. Usually 2-3 wraps that are firm, but not extremely tight will suffice.

On the last wrap, instead of going upward and diagonally, bring the bandage around the

bird's body and under the opposite wing. Remember also that this layer will need to be firm, but allow for chest expansion (breathing!).

When the bandage is in place, and before you place the self-adhesive layer, check to ensure the bandaged wing is level with the unbandaged wing when folded. This simple check is quick assurance the bandaged wing is in proper position.

If the wings are unclipped, also check that the primary tips lie on top of the secondary feathers. If they are under the secondary feathers, the top of the wing is flexed too much and the bandage needs to be loosened.

Simple Wing Splint

This splint is good for small birds such as finches and canaries as well as doves and pigeons.

Start with your bandage edge just inside the affected wing. Wrap the bandage around the body incorporating the top of the opposite wing. Attach the bandage to itself on the original side. Make sure the bandage is secure; yet loose enough for the bird to breathe.

A second strip of bandage material is connected to the first in the center of the bird's back. It is then run the length of the body and down the tail. It lies beneath the wing tips.

A third strip of bandage is placed below the legs and above the vent. Start this piece under the edge of the affected wing (as with the first strip) and wrap it around the bird and secure to the second bandage strip.

A fourth piece of bandage material would be placed where the tips of unclipped wings would meet. This bandage goes around the wing tips and tail to offer a counter balance for the remaining splint.

Several things you should be especially aware of when caring for a sick bird at home are temperature, food and water access, environment, and mental status of your patient. A sick bird needs extra warmth at all times until fully recovered. An appropriate temperature would be 80-85 F. Make sure you are using a safe instrument to heat the cage or room. Some items that can be sources: heating pads, light bulbs, incubators, ceramic heaters in small rooms. Examine each for safety with your particular situation--anything has the potential to be problematic. Monitor the ambient temperature to ensure the bird does not overheat. Monitor for signs of overheating (such as panting). I like to give most birds a choice of warmer or cooler, lighter or darker. (Note: 24 hours of light is stressful for any creature.)

Offer the bird's favorite foods (even if not nutritionally complete) along with healthy foods. The goal is to keep the bird eating! A bird that is not eating may need to be force

fed. If you are not experienced at hand feeding or gavage feeding, do not attempt to force feed a sick bird. Aspiration could result. Make sure food and water is easily accessible. These birds do not feel like climbing to the top of the cage for a bite to eat and will forego it. Pedialyte helps with their electrolyte balance in those birds not wanting to eat or drink much.

Make sure the bird feels secure in a dimly lit and quiet room. Do not leave the dog, cat, or other predator type animals for company no matter how well they usually get along. The bird may feel pressured to "look good" instead of looking like dinner, using energy he/she may not have. Make sure the bird is protected from further injury. Most often this comes in the form of birds falling off perches and injuring a wing or leg. Get those perches low!

Monitor your bird's mental status from a vantage point where he/she cannot see you. A bird will often "perk up" when someone is near and go back to lethargy as soon as they leave. Have all materials needed to medicate and restrain nearby and easily accessible when treating. The goal is to get the treatment done quickly, correctly, and with as little stress for the patient as possible.

The best advice I can give when faced with an emergency is to stay calm. You do not offer anyone benefit when in a panic. Panic is for after it is all done. Practice what you would do in an emergency, if possible. Most of all, remember to take a deep breath and help when your pet needs you the most.

First Aid Kit Musts

styptic powder/silver nitrate sticks
hemostats/fine needle nose pliers/tweezers
gauze
cotton balls and swabs
roll gauze
tape
vet wrap or ace bandage with velcro (no safety pins please!)
nail trimmers
scissors
First Aid handouts
peroxide
towel
betadine/chlorhexadine
tape
Your avian veterinarian's phone number:
Your emergency clinic's phone numbers:

Disaster Supplies

emergency lighting

power supplies (generators/batteries)
communication devices
water/food (check freshness periodically)
transport
ID for your pets
escape plans (also things like fitting everyone in the car)
disease prevention ideas (ex: keeping sick from well or clean water sources)
phone numbers of emergency aid (be it relative, friend, or government agency)
travel cages that the animals could stay in if needed for longer periods

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Loving Hands Animal Clinic
13775 Highway 9
Milton, Georgia 30004
(770) 667-9022
www.lovinghands.com