

Hepatic Lipidosis - Fatty Liver Disease

Perhaps one of the sadder diseases many avian veterinarians see is that of hepatic lipidosis or fatty liver disease. It is sad in a number of ways since often the birds are very ill, life-threateningly so, or possibly having died suddenly. Often the owners have been unaware of the dangers of feeding their beloved pet the seeds, peanuts, or other fatty foods the bird obviously loves to eat. These are truly cases of "loving your bird to death".

Any bird can fall victim to fatty liver disease. Most commonly budgies, cockatiels, lovebirds, and Amazons are diagnosed with this silent killer. Birds that are on all seed diets or are being fed high energy diets and receiving little exercise are prone to fatty livers. Pets dealing with this disease may show a variety of signs including, but not limited to oily feathers, feather picking, decreased exercise tolerance, obesity, diarrhea, dyspnea (difficulty breathing), depression/stupor, ataxia (wobbliness), anorexia-complete/sudden, poor growth and reduced disease resistance, sudden illness or death.

When these birds present to your avian veterinarian, these signs along with physical exam findings of enlarged abdomens where the edges of the liver may actually be felt and sometimes yellow urates are noted. Further diagnostics are usually recommended and may include bloodwork, radiographs (x-rays), ultrasounds and/or biopsies.

Fat accumulation in the liver is caused by increased fatty acid production due to the high fat diet. These fatty acids are not immediately being used, so they get stored in the liver. Once there, they interfere with the liver's usual duties. Important nutrients such as calcium suffer impaired absorption and, as a sequelae of both diet and disease vitamin/mineral deficiencies exist.

Treatment can be attempted and successfully navigated to have a healthy pet bird once more. This problem does not occur overnight and, likewise, the return to health is not immediate. The basis of treatment is elimination of fat in the diet replaced by healthy foods such as pellets, fresh vegetables, and fresh fruits. Any bird suffering from fatty liver may need supportive care such as fluids, medications to decrease blood ammonia levels, and treatment of secondary infections.

If your bird is on an all seed diet, please consult your avian veterinarian about ways to change the diet without endangering his/her health. If your bird is on a good diet, please do not regress to only the "fun-fatty-foods". Remember, these pets may live a number of years on a poor diet, but imagine the many more years of joy they can bring you on a healthy diet! Yearly health exams are always recommended for your bird(s) and be sure

to discuss any and all concerns with your avian veterinarian at that time.

References:

Avian Medicine: Principles and Applications-Ritchie, Harrison, and Harrison 1994
Association of Avian Veterinarians Conference Proceedings 1996

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