Feather Quality and Skin Condition are Nutrition-Related

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Chelsea is a mature cockatiel whose owner, Martha, couldn't figure out what was going on with her bird's feathers and skin. Martha knew the condition of the feathers was an indicator of her bird's overall health, so she became concerned when she noticed Chelsea was preening excessively, her feather appearance was suffering, and her skin had become scaly. Her veterinarian could see Chelsea had many lost feathers and poor pigmentation.

After thoroughly examining Chelsea for signs of disease or medical conditions, and asking Martha about Chelsea's diet, environment, and habits, her veterinarian knew the condition was nutrition-related.

Malnourishment

Unfortunately, Chelsea was suffering from malnourishment. Unlike undernourishment, indicative of a bird not getting enough to eat, Chelsea wasn't getting foods with enough vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients.

Good Intentions...

Sometimes, well-intended owners do two things regarding their bird's nutrition that are not in their bird's

Veterinary Perspective (Feather Health... and What You Can Do)

Nutrition is very important in feather health, but it's not the only factor. There are other deficiencies or problems that can affect the quality and condition of your bird's skin and feathers. The following checklist may help reduce the chances your bird will have skin/feather problems.

Example of poor feather quality.

- ✔ Birds need plenty of sleep – 10 to 12 hours every night, with a quiet, darkened atmosphere.

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best interest. First, while they do a good job of offering formulated (pelleted) diets, unfortunately, many owners of large birds make seed or commercial treats available in large quantities daily because they know their birds love them. Second, many owners make home-made treats and feed them regularly to their birds, which can be a problem if the treats are given in large numbers and are made with highly processed, bleached flour and white sugar. For most psittacines, formulated food should be 65-80% of the diet. Vegetables should make up 15-30%, and the remainder can be fruits and nuts. Realize some species such as lories and hyacinth macaws have very special dietary needs. Be sure to consult with your avian veterinarian to know what diet is best for your bird.

- ✔ Birds' feathers do better in slightly humid conditions. Your indoor bird may require frequent access to bathing water or the shower, and you may find it necessary to mist your bird or operate a humidifier.
- ✔ Exposure to natural sunlight helps produce the vitamins necessary to keep skin and feathers healthy. Indoor birds will benefit from full spectrum UV lighting or daily exposure to natural light.
- ✔ Mites can cause damage to the skin and feathers. Treat existing infestations and limit exposure to these damaging pests.

Seeds have some nutritional benefits, but are not nutritionally complete. The home-made and processed treats rarely contain any substantial amount of nutrition. Birds often get filled up, but they don't get their fill of essential vitamins and minerals, and often get too much fat.

Feather & Skin Damage

After time, birds on a high-seed and treats diet begin to show signs of feather and skin damage. As they go through periods of molt, their stores of essential vitamins and minerals necessary for feather development and health become depleted. Without proper replenishment, damage to feathers and skin can result. Birds can develop dry, flaky, and irritable skin, as well as unzippered feathers, stress bars, or poor feather pigmentation.

Foods Rich in vitamin A (Dark Orange and Dark Green in color)		
Apricots	Broccoli	Carrots
Dried Red Peppers	Parsley	Spinach
Squash	Sweet Potatoes	

Vitamin Needs

Since birds on incomplete diets can become deficient in Vitamin A, we recommend a high quality pelleted diet to supply this important vitamin. It is responsible for maintaining eye, mouth, skin, feather, gastrointestinal, reproductive, and respiratory health.

Premium Diets

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If already feeding a premium pelleted diet, kudos to you. Pelleted diets are preferred by avian veterinarians because each pellet contains the same nutritional value as the next. Birds cannot pick out their favorite pieces, at the expense of complete nutrition.

Homemade Treats

As for homemade treats, we don't discourage their use altogether, but we do recommend owners replace highly processed ingredients with something more nutritious, like freshly chopped fruit and vegetable mixes, or a cooked diet. These diets still allow owners to make something special for their birds, but are more nutritious. Commercial treats are fine, too, if used sparingly, and if sugar, corn syrup, and other sweeteners are avoided. To introduce new foods to a bird, we suggest you eat them (or pretend to) in front of your bird first, then offer it to them. A great way to give your bird treats is to place them in a foraging toy. This will make the treat last longer. It will also provide more mental stimulation to prevent boredom, a common cause of feather picking.

Our Recommendations - For Feather Health and Nutritional Gaps

This whole food source helps support the health of your bird's eyes, skin, plumage, heart, and immune system.

Egg-Cite! is designed to be your bird's primary food source with a wholesome mix of grass and plant seeds, fortified pellets and a variety of wholesome ingredients.

A flight cage works great when taking small birds outdoors.

Fruits & Veggies are a great option for creating your own healthy treats to help supplement your bird's daily diet.

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