

# Caring for a Sick Bird / Emergency Care: Supportive Care

## Caring for a Sick Bird / Emergency Care

[Symptoms and Potential Causes](#) ... [Bird Species and Diseases They are Most Susceptible to](#) ... [Avian Pain Assessment & Management](#)

### Emergency treatment for the ill bird at home

The following instructions refer to emergency treatment to be given at home, prior to hospitalization. Veterinary attention should be sought as soon as possible to determine the cause of illness and treatment options.

- If it is a wild bird, please contact your local [wildlife rehabilitation center](#). This is especially important for [hummingbird](#) or other nectar-feeding chicks that require specialized care.

### Other Useful Links:

[Identifying sick birds](#) ... [Emergency care for a sick bird](#) ... [Heavy Metal Poisoning / Caring for your Bird](#) ... [First Aid Procedures](#) ... [First Aid Kit](#) ... [Do-It-Yourself Disease Testing and DNA Sexing](#) ... [Bacterial Testing / Microbiology \(Step-by-Step Instructions\)](#)

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Sick birds need supportive treatment, such as warmth and fluids. You also need to watch the bird carefully because if it stops eating and drinking then forcefeeding may be necessary.

### Optimal Set-up for a Sick Bird:

- **First of all, the cage needs to be kept meticulously clean** -- this is especially important when it houses a sick bird that cannot deal with germs as well as a healthy one might.
- UNLESS your pet is running a fever, WARMTH IS CRITICAL! Provided your pet is NOT running a fever, its environment should be kept at about 90 degrees. In cases where a pet bird does have fever, you don't want to increase the ambient (room) temperature further as it would raise your pet's temperature even more - and that alone could be lethal. **A chilled bird** will be fluffed up. **An overheated bird** will raise its wings away from its body and potentially pant.

A hospital cage would be great, as it would keep the temperature at the level you want. But most people don't have that available and an acrylic bird carrier or fish tank available at pet stores can potentially be substituted. If you use one of those, you have to monitor the temperature quite carefully. This being said, putting a sick bird into a new environment may be stressful. Maybe placing the cage into a small room that can easily be heated (small bathroom, for example) might do. Drape a heavy cover on one of the sides, but make sure that the bird doesn't "sit in the dark" -- except at night. Potential heat sources can be a heating pad underneath the cage, hot bottles or heat lamps. Of course, the heat lamps shouldn't be used at night, as your pet needs to rest. Maybe a combination of heating pad at night and a heat lamp during the day might be an option. Do whatever works best for you.

- **Look out for dehydration** (symptoms and protocol below).
- **Make sure that all food and water dishes are within easy reach.**
- **Reduce stress** as much as possible. This may mean minimizing handling and removing other birds from the cage. It is vital that the sick bird gets at least 12 hours of undisturbed rest per day.
- **Keep any perches low** to reduce injury from falling.
- Sick birds may benefit from live bird-specific probiotics that reduce the proliferation of infectious, pathogenic gut bacteria, and boost the immune system. Birds that have undergone an antibiotic treatment in particular need to replace beneficial bacteria that were destroyed during the treatment.

**The Healing Power of Natural Sunlight:** It is very common for birds to have a vitamin D deficiency or insufficiency that can lead to myriad health problems. **Providing a sick bird with beneficial rays** can lift its mood and potentially remedy any deficiency that could have contributed to its health problems ...

**The most common health problems associated with vitamin D deficiency are:** weakened immune systems / susceptibility to diseases, soft bones, bent keels, splayed legs, abnormal beak development, reproductive problems (egg binding, soft-shell eggs, dying chicks) as well as [seizures](#) and, to a lesser extent, [Stargazing](#) (twisted back) ... In sick birds, the light exposure helps in remedying any immediate need for vitamin D, as well as boosting the mood of a sick bird -- another important healing factor.

- **In areas where access to natural sunlight is limited** (such as in the northern hemisphere during the winter months), [full-spectrum lamps](#) can be used to provide UVA and UVB rays.
- [\*\*Natural food sources rich in Vitamin D\*\*](#)
- **Potentially discuss supplementation with your vet.** Supplementation needs to be

carefully screened and supervised by a vet since an excess of vitamin D (in the form of a supplement) causes kidney damage and retards growth.

## **Emergency Nutrition for Sick Birds / Avoid Dehydration:**

Birds suffering from dehydration may have crinkly skin around their eyes. Another way to diagnose dehydration is to pinch their skin for a second (which is possible in chicks or birds with unfeathered areas on their bodies). Dehydrated skin will remain tented for several seconds, rather than bouncing right back.

The ill bird has low blood and energy levels that must be restored rapidly.

### **Preventing Dehydration:**

- Fresh, clean water should be available at all times.
- Adding a little honey to the water may encourage drinking; however, the water needs to be changed frequently as bacteria grows easily in sweetened water
- Commercial electrolyte replacement fluids (i.e., Pedialyte) will also help prevent dehydration - the biggest risk a sick bird faces. When caring for a sick bird I replace the water with Pedialyte, which will counteract any dehydration.

### **Treat Dehydration:**

**To remedy dehydration use:**

- commercial electrolyte fluids, such as Pedialyte; or
- mix one pint of water, one pint of Gatorade, 1 teaspoon of honey or Karo syrup, 1 level teaspoon of **aluminum-free** baking soda (such as "Bob's Red Mill Baking Soda"), 1 level teaspoon table salt.
- Caution: Measure with care; inaccurate measurements can cause severe diarrhea. Orange or cherry juice helps in hydrating your bird.

Force-feeding is necessary when the energy levels drop so low that the bird does not eat or drink and is in danger of dying. You may try getting fluids into the sick birds using a dropper.

Crop needling is recommended for those who are confident with the [crop needle technique](#). This procedure is technically difficult and should not be undertaken by those who are inexperienced, as it is potentially fatal if done incorrectly.

### **Provide Warmth:**

The ill bird requires warmth (about 30-35 degrees Celsius / 86 - 95 degrees Fahrenheit). Use a thermometer to monitor the cage temperature. Especially birds with cold feet need to be in a heated environment. Options are:

- **Use:**
  - hot water bottlebar heatera heating pad set on low placed beneath (not in) the cage. Make sure to place a towel or blanket on top of the pad as a physical barrier to any metal of the cage.an incandescent light bulk can also be installed overhead to provide extra warmth (avoid white bulbs because the bright light will interfere with the patient's sleep. It's best to use a 40 to 60-watt green bulb as a source of heat.**Heating Options** A towel, blanket or cage cover can be used to provide additional seclusion and to keep the warmth inside the cage. Keep the cage covered three-fourth during the daytime and cover the cage completely at night.
- **Do not** use fan heaters or lights.

Give sterile seed and remove all other foodstuffs.

Poor quality feed has been cited as the most common cause of illness in pet birds. At the first sign of illness remove all other foodstuffs from the cage, including seed, millet sprays, grit or sand, fruit or vegetables. Grit and minerals are removed until recovery is complete because the ill bird will over-engorge on grit and become ill with an obstruction problem.

If possible give the appropriate medicines by mouth.

Finches, canaries, doves and some parrots drink enough water to ensure that they get the correct medicine dose each day, but other small birds - especially sick cockatiels or budgies may not drink enough of the medicated water to be fully effective. For this reason some medicines are best given by injection, crop needle, nostril or by dropper in the mouth.

[Administering medication to less than cooperative birds.](#)

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**Vet Examinations:** [The New Bird Exam](#)

**Find a Vet / Vet Listings:** [Recommended Vets](#)

[Complete Blood Count \(CBC\) / Avian Blood Panel / Hematology / Serology](#)

[Feather Picking](#)

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**HEATING OPTIONS** (for both Baby Birds and Convalescent Adult Birds):

- [DANGER: Non-Stick Surface Heating Lamps!](#)
- Heating Lamps / Bulbs

- Heaters
  - [Hospital Cages](#)
  - Salamander Ceramic, Quartz, Metal and Flat Faced Panel Electric Infrared Heating Elements
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## VETERINARY

I feel strongly that any bird should be provided with veterinary care. For breeders or multi-bird households it is even more crucial to act upon a sick bird, to find out the cause of the sickness and if it is something that is infectious. The responsibility we breeders carry is enormous, not only over the lives and well being of the many birds that we own, but also for the babies that we sell.

Saying this, I am also aware of the RISKS associated with a vet visit. Like a breeder friend of mine said: "What better way to pick up a disease!" I totally agree with that. I feel a breeder would be better served to have a vet come to their premises rather than going out and potentially exposing their bird to a deadly disease. Unfortunately, it is very difficult nowadays to find a vet who offers this kind of service

**However, there ARE ways to minimize risks of 'catching a disease' at the vet's:**

1. Express your concern of your bird getting in contact with an airborne (or otherwise) disease pathogen at the veterinary office, and ask to make an appointment very early in the morning before many (if any) sick birds have been on the premises, or -- if this is not possible -- at any other time when traffic in the office is slow. Of course, if it's an emergency and the bird is very sick, we can't be all that picky about the appointment time, but still, there are measures you can take to minimize exposure to any airborne or otherwise pathogens.
2. Keep your bird in a COVERED carrier at any times other than the actual examination by the vet. (A clean, oversized towel or a blanket serves this purpose well.)
3. Stay away from any other patients and their owners -- consider them potentially contagious. Do not allow anyone to touch your bird with the exception of the health care staff for the purpose of examining your bird.
4. Once in the treatment room, place a CLEAN towel on top of the treatment table and place your bird on it. Preferably, your bird should at no time touch the surface of the treatment table. On numerous occasions I was told, "I don't have to worry about that! My vet disinfects right in front of me!" Please note that the "Spray and Wipe" method of disinfecting does NOT work since disinfectants need up to 20 minutes of actual contact to kill disease causing pathogens.
5. Observe the vet / vet's assistant to see if they wash their hands in between patients and if not, I would strongly recommend changing vets. In an ideal situation, a vet would comply with advanced infectious control measures.

A bird that was at the vet's, or any other place where there are birds of unknown health status (i.e., bird shows), should be considered potentially contagious and quarantined for a MINIMUM of 2 weeks, preferably a month up to three.

How long I quarantine my birds depends on the risk they were exposed to. If they came from a pet situation prior to coming to my place and have been of good health for many years, I may only quarantine for 2 weeks. If they come from a petstore or a suspect breeder, then I may go up to 3 months. Additionally, I perform disease testing at the vet's for really suspect birds, or for healthy looking birds perform DNA testing, which only costs \$55 for three diseases (i.e., Polyoma, Beak and Feather, and Psittacosis). There are several companies listed

Species Research by [Sibylle Johnson](#)

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**NEED A VET?**

[USA: Find Your Local Avian Veterinarian](#)

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