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Hand Rearing Cockatiels

Cockatiel neonates are altricial, which means that they are born helpless and require prolonged, intensive care. They are born with an underdeveloped immune system, so they are vulnerable to infectious diseases, and thus require a very clean environment. Some problems that may arise when hand-rearing cockatiel chicks include keeping them at an inappropriate ambient temperature, feeding formula at an inappropriate temperature, feeding multiple birds with the same utensil, and keeping an unsanitary environment.

Housing and Ambient Temperature

Newly hatched chicks should be kept in a cage or an old aquarium that can function as a brooder. The brooder should be heated from above with two 60-watt bulbs, and the interior temperature should be maintained initially at 37.5°C (99.5°F). As the chicks age, the temperature may be decreased gradually, but it should not be lower than 30°C (86°F). It may be helpful to have a good thermostat to control the brooder temperature because sudden temperature changes can have a negative impact on the chicks.

Feeding

- Several good commercial hand-rearing diets are available on the market, including Kaytee and ZuPreem. Most require that you add warm (37.7°C to 42.2°C [100°F to 108°F]) water, but you should follow the package instructions carefully. To help maintain the temperature of the formula throughout feeding, place the formula dish into a bowl of warm water.
- Place the chick on a flat surface, preferably on a warmed towel, and support the chick with your hand. You may use an eye dropper or a syringe to feed the chicks. Make sure to use only one feeding instrument and feeding dish for each bird, and sterilize or dispose of your feeding instruments after each use. To get the bird to gape, start by gently tapping the top of its beak with the feeding instrument. If this does not work, gently pry open the beak, and place a small drop of water into the mouth. This will stimulate the bird to swallow the water. After a few rounds of this, the bird will learn to open its mouth when you tap the beak.
- When the bird opens its mouth, place the syringe or eye dropper into the mouth, over the tongue, to the left side of the bird's mouth, and administer the formula when the bird swallows. When feeding is complete, rinse the inside of the bird's mouth with a few drops of warm water. You should clean the beak, head, and vent with warm water before placing the bird back inside its enclosure.

Information cited from:

Mayer, J and Donnelly, T., eds. Clinical Veterinary Advisor: Birds and Exotic Pets. Elsevier, Philadelphia, PA. 2013. ISBN: 9781-4160-3969-3

Feeding Schedule

- Do not feed newly hatched chicks for the first 10 to 15 hours of life. After this point, you may start with 1 drop of lukewarm water. After 1 hour, feed another drop with ground, pure white cuttlebone and pure yogurt, and repeat this feeding again in another hour. After this feeding, you may begin to feed a few drops of thin hand-rearing diet every hour.
- Example of a feeding schedule, days 4 to 25:
 - Days 4 to 9: Feed commercial hand-rearing formula every 2 hours. It is not necessary to feed between midnight and 5:00 am. The formula should have the consistency of creamy milk.
 - Days 10 to 14: Feed hand-rearing formula every 3 hours, with a consistency of creamy milk. Again, it is not necessary to feed between the hours of midnight and 5:00 am.
 - Days 15 to 20: Feed formula every 4 hours, with a slightly thicker consistency than previously. At 20 days, you may place low perches and a small bowl of water into the cage with the chicks. You may also add things for curious chicks to peck at, such as well-cleaned, 1-inch twigs (willow, hazel, apple, etc.) or crushed cuttlebone.
 - Days 21 to 25: Feed formula 2 or 3 times daily, with the same thicker consistency. You may begin to introduce soaked seeds and millet mixed with dry formula, as well as chopped fruits and vegetables, to get the chicks accustomed to seeking out their own food.

Things to Watch For

- Aspiration pneumonia
 - Try to feel the bird's crop before feeding to get a sense of how much formula you can give. Overfilling the crop can be dangerous because the extra formula can flow back up the esophagus, into the back of the throat, and down into the trachea and lungs. Also, when feeding, watch for the bird to pause to take a breath, and do not feed at this point.
 - Chicks that have aspirated formula often cough after feeding, and eventually may develop difficulty breathing and recurrent respiratory infections. To avoid this, stop administering formula if you see it flowing back into the mouth, and do not administer if the bird is taking a breath. Birds with severe aspiration pneumonia often die soon after the episode, but less severe cases may be treated with supportive care and nebulization (converting liquid medication to a fine mist) to help clear formula from lungs and air sacs.
- Crop stasis
 - Make sure the formula is not too thick. Thick formula can harden in the crop and sit there, unable to move forward into the stomach. If you suspect that this has happened, try administering a small amount of warm water, and gently massage the crop. Other factors that may predispose a bird to crop stasis include infection, burns, inadequate feeding formula and environmental temperature, and primary digestive disorders. Birds with crop stasis often require aggressive therapy to correct dehydration, so you should consider calling your veterinarian should this occur.
- Crop burns
 - Crop burns occur when the feeding formula is too hot—usually greater than 43.3°C (110°F). Feeding formula that is heated in the microwave is often associated with crop burns because hot spots may develop in the formula. If you do decide to use a microwave, make sure you stir the formula thoroughly afterward to distribute the heat more evenly. Early

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signs to watch out for include redness, blisters, and necrotic (dead, black) tissue at the site. Eventually, a passage (fistula) may form between crop and skin, so that when the necrotic tissue sloughs off, you may see formula spilling out of the crop at the site. If this occurs, surgical correction is required to repair the damage.

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