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Protecting Your Pet Bird: Common Household Toxins

Birds are uniquely sensitive to many common household items that we expose ourselves to every day. They are particularly sensitive to airborne toxins because of their specially designed respiratory system, and their fast metabolism can accelerate the effects of an ingested toxin. The following lists highlight some (but not all) of the more common household toxins that you should be aware of when protecting the health of your beloved pet bird.

Heavy Metals

- *Lead*. Found in items such as lead shot, wire, old paint or painted items from a less-developed country, foil from champagne and wine bottles, fishing weights, curtain weights, stained glass, Tiffany lamps, bird toys with lead weights, costume jewelry, and mirror backs. This heavy metal can cause immune suppression with chronic low-grade exposure, making birds susceptible to infection. Other signs include depression, weakness, vomiting, increased drinking and urination, seizures, and diarrhea or bloody feces.
- *Zinc*. Found in galvanized metal (e.g., nails, staples), solder, padlocks, zippers, snaps, costume jewelry, pennies since 1982, pain, zinc oxide skin lotion (Desitin, zinc oxide sunblock), calamine lotion, suppositories, some shampoos, Desenex, and fertilizers. This metal can cause signs similar to lead toxicity.
- *Others*. Copper, iron, and mercury

Inhalant Toxins

- *Polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE)*. Sources are nonstick cookware (e.g., Teflon), drip pans, heat lamp covers, irons, and ironing board covers. Gas is released when these objects are overheated (>530°F), but fumes are released with regular usage too. PTFE can cause acute death as the result of respiratory failure. Mild exposure can cause moist lung sounds, difficulty breathing, wobbles, depression, or anxiety.
- *Perfume, deodorant, hairspray*. These products can cause respiratory problems, including difficulty breathing, in birds. With large and direct exposure, it is possible that death can occur! Never use around your bird any spray or aerosol with a propellant.
- *Cigarette, cigar, and pipe smoke*. These smokes can cause chronic eye problems, skin irritation, and respiratory disease. The bird may start to cough or sneeze, or may have sinus and/or eye infections. Chronic second-hand smoke may lead to secondary bacterial infection, which may be fatal.
- *Household disinfectants*. Products such as chlorine bleach, phenols, and ammonia can cause irritation, toxicosis, or death.
- *Natural gas leak*. This can cause sudden death in birds.
- *Marijuana smoke*. In addition to respiratory distress, this can cause severe CNS depression and regurgitation in birds.

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

Plants

- *Avocado*. Ingestion can cause agitation, feather pulling, lethargy, anorexia, difficulty breathing, and death. Inflammation of the liver, kidney, pancreas, skin, and proventriculus can occur.
- *Black locust*. Eating the leaves of this plant will cause depression, dyspnea, coughing, sneezing, and vomiting.
- *Clematis*. This plant can cause regurgitation.
- *Lily of the valley*. The leaves of this plant can cause lethargy, weakness, diarrhea, and regurgitation.
- *Oleander*. A beautiful but deadly flower that causes lethargy, diarrhea, weakness, spasms, salivation, vomiting, and death.
- *Philodendron*. Choking, regurgitation, and diarrhea can occur with this plant.
- *Poinsettia*. This can cause red feces, diarrhea, liver disease, and gastrointestinal upset.
- *Rhododendron*. The leaves of this plant will cause lethargy, weakness, regurgitation, and diarrhea.
- *Yew*. Ataxia, regurgitation, difficulty breathing, and death are hallmark signs of ingestion of yew.
- *Virginia creeper*. This plant can cause depression and regurgitation if the leaves are ingested.

Miscellaneous

- *Alcohol*. Ingestion or topical absorption of alcohol can cause lethargy, ataxia, regurgitation, or even death.
- *Aluminum chloride*. This product is found in deodorants. It can cause oral irritation, hemorrhagic gastrointestinal problems, ataxia, and kidney disease.
- *Chocolate*. Birds may eat a significant amount of this sweet treat, which can cause depression, regurgitation, seizures, and death. The culprits are mainly caffeine and theobromine in the chocolate.
- *Cooking oils*. Skin burns may occur with contact exposure, but ingestion will cause diarrhea, dehydration, regurgitation, and pneumonia.
- *Pine oil disinfectants*. These are often mixed with phenol disinfectants. Irritation to mucous membranes can occur, causing conjunctivitis, photophobia, vomiting, and abdominal pain. Respiratory depression, ataxia, and death have been reported.
- *Nicotine ingestion*. In addition to smoke inhalation caused by cigarettes, nicotine ingestion causes depression, cyanosis (blue mucous membranes), and difficulty breathing.
- *Petroleum products*. Found in mineral spirits, nail polish remover, furniture polish, gasoline, and paint remover. Signs of exposure include skin irritation, depression, and respiratory irritation. Liver and kidney damage can also occur.
- *Sodium chloride*. If too much table salt or salty water is ingested, an increase in drinking, depression, tremors, stiffening of limbs, ataxia, and death can occur. Be careful!

With a little preparation and common sense, you can create a safe and happy home for your pet bird.

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Information cited from:

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