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First Aid for Pet Birds

Step-by-step tips for emergency care.

BY PAUL M. GIBBONS, DVM, MS, DABVP (AVIAN)

Prepare a bird-safe carrier before you need it. The carrier should have smooth sides and padding to protect your bird while en route to your vet. This carrier works well for birds that are able to perch, but it should be covered with a blanket to provide darkness and temperature control. The perch should be removed if the bird's condition makes it too difficult to perch.
First aid is defined as treatment for life-threatening problems or severe pain, given to a patient before transfer to a regular medical care facility. The goals are to protect yourself from injury, to preserve life, to prevent further injury to your bird and to promote recovery. In this article, you will find tips and techniques that will make all the difference in the outcome of your bird’s health in the event of a medical emergency or serious medical condition. Get assistance, such as a helper, before attempting to provide first aid. A helper will be able to run for supplies, call the veterinary hospital and drive the vehicle while you attend to your bird.

Build a first aid kit (see sidebar “First Aid Kit” on pg 61 to learn how). Routine bird healthcare items such as toenail clippers, styptic powder, wing-feather trimming scissors and a mist bottle should be maintained separately from the first aid kit. This way, the first-aid kit is not disrupted or moved from its specific location during routine care activities.

Visit your local emergency veterinarian on a quiet day to familiarize yourself with the driving route so you don’t get lost during the inevitable anxiety of a crisis (make note of alternative routes as well, in case of traffic congestion or road closures). An initial visit also allows you to develop a rapport with your bird’s vet. (Call the vet’s office beforehand to check his/her availability.)

Keep your veterinarian’s phone number, as well as that of the nearest emergency clinic that accommodates avian patients, in a visible location, such as on your fridge or on a wall near your bird’s cage.

Now that you know what you need to do in an emergency, here’s what to do should you find yourself in an emergency situation involving your bird.

ABCs Of Emergency Support
The ABCs of preserving your pet bird’s life include a clear Airway, regular Breathing and Circulation of blood within the arteries and veins. Take your bird in for emergency veterinary care as soon as possible if any of these are affected:

AIRWAY CLEAR: Noticeable respiratory movement or noise is not normal in pet birds. The first step is to check for airway obstructions:

**STEP 1:** Gently open the beak.

**STEP 2:** Use a pair of gauze loops to position the upper and lower beak apart.

**STEP 3:** Ask a helper to direct a flashlight.

**STEP 4:** Remove visible objects using tweezers or hemostats.

**STEP 5:** Maintain an open airway during transport by holding the bird’s head in a natural position.

BREATHING SUSTAINED: Difficulty breathing can either be a primary problem or secondary to other diseases. Respiratory distress must be taken very seriously. Some common problems that can contribute to respiratory distress include egg binding, an enlarged abdomen, pain and heat stroke.

**STEP 1:** Maintain the head in a natural position so air passes easily with each breath.

**STEP 2:** Cover wounds that are leaking air with gauze or a cotton ball.

**STEP 3:** Flow oxygen into the travel carrier or near the bird’s face if it is available.

**STEP 4:** If breathing is slow, ineffective or has stopped, provide mouth-to-nose ventilation by holding the bird’s mouth closed while blowing a gentle puff of air into both nostrils every 10 seconds (CPR).

**STEP 5:** Place the bird in a quiet, dark, warm (85-degrees Fahrenheit), humid enclosure for immediate transport to an emergency veterinary hospital.

CIRCULATION: CONTROL BLEEDING: Active bleeding is an immediate threat to your bird’s life. Bleeding can occur internally or externally; common causes include trauma, a broken
Blood feather, bite wounds, liver failure, polyomavirus infection, lacerations, fractured bones, ruptured tumors and bleeding ulcers. Bleeding into a body cavity, under the skin, into the respiratory system or into the digestive system might not be obvious. Bleeding beneath the skin can appear purple, but it can be hidden by feathers. Ruptured external tumors often require emergency surgery. Blood in a bird's droppings can be red, but digested blood is black and sticky, like road tar. If you suspect internal bleeding, place the bird into a warm, quiet, dark, small enclosure, and transport it to an avian veterinarian immediately.

For external bleeding, locate the source, and apply direct pressure using gauze, tissue, a cotton ball or a cotton-tipped applicator, and maintain pressure for at least three minutes before checking to see if it has stopped. Transport your bird to the veterinarian to determine whether the bleeding has caused anemia and if your bird needs specific treatment.

Never use styptic powder or hydrogen peroxide on skin wounds. These products cause pain, damage cells, and delay healing. It is okay to use styptic powder on a toenail that has been clipped too short, but it shouldn't be used to control bleeding on the skin.

Broken blood feathers are a common cause of external bleeding. Most pet birds are in a continuous state of feather molt. Developing feathers bleed continuously if they break, and the bleeding rarely forms an effective clot. Bleeding blood feathers should be removed. Flight feathers on the wings are attached to the bone, so a trained professional should remove the blood feather to minimize the risk of feather follicle damage.

It is reasonable to remove tail or body feathers at home using the following technique:

**STEP 1:** Safely restrain the bird by gently wrapping it in a towel, taking care to ensure you are not restricting its breathing.

**STEP 2:** Grasp the feather firmly near the base of the shaft at skin level with tweezers, hemostats or needle-nose pliers.

**STEP 3:** Pull the feather straight out with slow, steady pressure and without twisting or bending.

**STEP 4:** Ensure proper removal by inspecting the base of the removed feather shaft. It should appear blunt and not hollow.

If the inside end of the shaft is hollow, then it probably broke (possibly beneath the skin) during the procedure and is likely to continue bleeding. If this is the case, apply direct pressure to the follicle for several minutes after removing the feather. Never apply hydrogen peroxide or styptic powder, because it will damage the feather follicle and can interfere with feather re-growth.

**TAKE IN FOR ADVANCED CARE:** If your bird appears to be in need of immediate veterinary care, bring your bird's regular favorite foods, including the packaging, its regular cage (or photographs of it), including the dirty cage papers/packages of any possible toxins, as well as all printed and handwritten records. All of these items can help your vet diagnose potential causes.

**Common Emergencies**

With all emergency problems concerning your pet bird, begin by assuring that the ABCs are addressed: airway is patent, breathing is supported and the circulation is assisted by stopping hemorrhage.

Head trauma is common. Animal bites, closing doors, mistaken steps, ceiling fans, falling objects and collision with a solid object...
(e.g., window/mirror) during flight are common causes. First aid begins by following the previously discussed ABCs, and then:

**Step 1:** Gently restrain the head if necessary in flailing or unconscious birds; use a towel to avoid being bitten. Avoid abnormal positioning of the bird’s head and neck.

**Step 2:** Provide mouth-to-nose ventilation (CPR) once every 10 seconds (6 times per minute) if the bird is not breathing.

**Step 3:** Place the bird in a small, quiet, dark, cool (75-degrees Fahrenheit), padded enclosure for transport to the emergency veterinarian.

**Seizures**

Seizures, or convulsions, can be life threatening when prolonged. Birds are often disoriented for several minutes following a seizure and might bite their beloved owner. Do not touch the bird until it is responding normally to your voice. For a seizure that lasts longer than one minute, bundle the bird in a towel for safe, gentle capture and restraint. Transport the bird to the veterinarian in a small, warm (85-degree Fahrenheit), dark, well-padded enclosure.

**FIRST AID KIT**

Very few items are required for a pet bird first aid kit. The most important item is a secure enclosure with smooth sides and padded interior that provides quiet, darkness and temperature control during transportation to the veterinary hospital. The temperature inside the carrier should be between 82 to 88 degrees Fahrenheit for all problems other than head trauma and heat stroke. For birds with head trauma or heat stroke, keep the temperature inside the carrier between 74 to 76 degrees Fahrenheit.

First-aid items should be kept in a special kit in a specific location and checked every three months for expiration dates, such as a batteries for a flashlight. The kit should include:

- Secure travel carrier
- A copy of this checklist with expiration dates and laundering schedules
- Towel for drying
- Towel for restraint
- Cotton balls
- Cotton-tipped applicators (or Q-tips brand swabs)
- Eye wash solution or hypoallergenic contact lens saline solution
- Flashlight with fresh batteries
- Digital indoor/outdoor thermometer with waterproof temperature probe
- Gauze roll
- Hemostatic clamps
- Bandage scissors
- Thumb forceps or tweezers
- Needle-nose pliers for large birds
- Body wrap sockliner — snug-fitting sock, stocking, or socklinette with the ends cut off for the head/tail and a hole cut in the side for the feet

Developing feathers have a substantial blood supply and are often called "blood feathers.” These feathers will hemorrhage when broken and might need to be removed to stop the bleeding. Primary flight feathers on the wing are attached to bone, so a trained professional should remove them.
This lovebird has been vomiting. Notice how the food material (seed) and vomitus has pasted the feathers together. A vomiting bird rapidly shakes its head from side-to-side, which dispenses fluid and food onto the head and around the cage.

**Diarrhea**

Severe diarrhea and polyuria can be a life threat. Many diseases can lead abnormal droppings, so seek veterinary care to help pinpoint the cause in your bird. Normal feces (poop) are tubular in shape and coil into a ball in many species of birds. Diarrhea causes the droppings to appear flat. Polyuria is the production of excess urine, which causes a large amount of liquid to be passed with the droppings. Loss of appetite and thirst quickly become life threatening in birds with diarrhea or polyuria. Ensure that the bird has ample food and water so it can keep up with the fluids and nutrients lost in the droppings. Do not attempt to medicate either of these conditions at home.

Numerous diseases could be involved and a diagnosis is necessary before any treatment can be recommended. Never squirt liquid medication into your bird’s mouth without instruction from a trained professional.

**Vomiting**

Repeated vomiting can also become life threatening; seek veterinary care. In general, vomiting can be differentiated from regurgitation by observing the bird during the event. A vomiting bird rapidly shakes its head side-to-side after bringing up the sticky material, thus dispersing liquid and food on its head and around the cage. Look for feathers on the head and face that are pasted together by slimy fluid or for food items stuck to vertical surfaces, such as cage bars.

Regurgitation, on the other hand, is usually more controlled and the food comes up slowly in a clump. Regurgitation is usually not a health concern, whereas repeated vomiting can be a threat to life. Do not attempt to medicate a bird that is vomiting. Instead, transport the bird to the veterinarian.

**Crop Stasis**

Crop stasis occurs when food is eaten but does not pass at a normal rate through the digestive tract, causing swelling at the base of the neck. This can become life threatening in some cases. The bird is eating and probably feels full, but it can lose weight because the food is not moving through the digestive system. Some birds vomit or regurgitate, and the buildup of food and water in the crop can spoil with overgrowth of bacteria and fungi. There is no specific first aid procedure other than taking the bird in veterinary care.

Refusal to eat for more than 12 hours can be life threatening, because birds have a high metabolic rate and usually have little energy in reserve. A bird that hasn’t eaten in more than 12 hours typically has scanty, dark-red, dark-green or black feces. If this the case, offer favorite foods, but do not attempt force-feeding, and take your bird to the vet. An exotic animal veterinary hospital can provide tube feeding and fluid therapy while investigating the diagnosis.

**Abdominal Swelling**

An enlarged abdomen can be a sign of life-threatening illness. Usually the abdomen slowly enlarges undetected over time, but this depends on the underlying cause. It becomes life threatening when the cause puts pressure on the air sacs and prevents airflow to the lungs. (See “Respiratory Distress” for first-aid recommendations.) Seek veterinary assistance to diagnose...
the cause and select the appropriate treatment.

**Prolapses**

Prolapsed tissue from the vent requires immediate attention. Tissue can prolapse from the intestines, reproductive tract or urinary tract. Keep the tissue moist by placing the bird in a small, dark, smooth-walled, warm enclosure (85 degrees Fahrenheit) that is bedded with a warm (85-to-90 degree Fahrenheit) damp cloth. Do not attempt to push the tissue back inside the bird, and do not apply ointments to the tissue. Transport the bird to the veterinarian immediately.

**Egg Binding**

Egg binding can be a life threat and is a particular threat in small passerines, including finches and canaries. (Immediately transport a finch or canary to the veterinarian in a small, dark, warm, 85-degrees-Fahrenheit enclosure that is bedded with warm, wet cloth.) Larger pet birds usually have more time before the threat becomes imminent, and several first-aid techniques can be employed at home before a visit to the veterinarian is required. Begin administering first aid by:

**Step 1:** First ensure that the bird is alert, active, perching, eating well and drinking normally.

**Step 2:** Provide supplemental calcium in the diet.

**Step 3:** Cage the bird in a warm (85-degrees-Fahrenheit), humid (70- to 80-percent relative humidity) environment, such as a bathroom, for 24 hours. Parrots might be stimulated to lay the egg if they are allowed to stand in a bowl of warm (95-to 100-degrees Fahrenheit) water for a period of five to 10 minutes.

**Step 4:** If the bird has not laid the egg in 24 hours or sooner and if you are concerned about its medical condition, transport it to veterinary care in a secure, well padded, warm (85-degrees-Fahrenheit) enclosure.

**Bite Wounds**

Animal bite wounds are always life threatening. Direct trauma can cause puncture wounds, fractures, blunt trauma and crushing injuries, but the germs in a mammal’s mouth can cause fatal infection in birds. Injuries are often hidden, and infection can smolder undetected for several days before causing abrupt death. Cats’ teeth make tiny puncture wounds that can be hidden; look for signs of saliva or disrupted feathers. Seek veterinary care any time you have the slightest suspicion that an animal might have bitten your bird. If you do see signs of a bite wound, begin administering first aid by:

**Step 1:** Ensuring the ABCs, with particular attention to stopping bleeding.

**Step 2:** Hold the head up if necessary in unconscious patients, but take care to avoid being bitten by a disoriented, fearful bird. Gently wrap the bird in towel if needed.

**Step 3:** Stabilize any apparent fractures (see below).

**Step 4:** Place the bird in a small, quiet, dark, padded enclosure for transport to the emergency veterinarian.

**Step 5:** Do not apply topical treatments to the wound.

**Dehydration**

Water deprivation or excessive salt intake must be treated with fluid therapy and can be fatal within hours. Begin administering first aid by:

**Step 1:** Offer small amounts (a few small mouthfuls) of cool water if the bird is able to drink on its own. You can drip the water into the beak, as well. Wait 10 minutes between each small drink.

**Step 2:** Do not force water into the mouth of

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**COMMON LIFE-THREATENING PROBLEMS IN BIRDS**

- Active bleeding, including blood feathers
- Animal bite wounds
- Breathing difficulty or respiratory effort
- Burns
- Crop stasis
- Egg binding
- Enlarged abdomen
- Eye problems
- Frostbite
- Head trauma
- Heat stroke
- Ingested or inhaled toxins
- Inhaled irritants
- Prolapsed tissue from the vent
- Refusal to eat or drink for more than 12 hours
- Repeated vomiting
- Salt toxicity
- Seizures
- Severe diarrhea
- Water deprivation
a bird that cannot swallow on its own; water could enter the airway and cause pneumonia or death.

**STEP 3:** Immediately transport the bird to a veterinarian for proper fluid therapy and electrolyte monitoring.

**Toxins**
Exposure to toxins is common in pet birds and can be life threatening. Some common ingested toxins include heavy metals (such as lead or zinc), avocado, chocolate and alcohol. A few examples of common inhaled toxins/irritants include smoke (e.g., cigarettes), overheated, non-stick coating (e.g., Teflon or Silverstone) fumes, scented candles, essential oils, carpet deodorants, and aerosol sprays. If your bird reacts to any of these, begin administering first aid by:

**STEP 5:** Do not cover the wound or apply creams/ointments until instructed to do so by the attending veterinarian.
**STEP 6:** Line the transport enclosure with tepid (75-degrees-Fahrenheit) wet towels for burns on the feet or lower body.
**STEP 7:** Seek immediate veterinary care.

**Heat stroke**
Heat stroke can be life threatening when severe. Overheated birds hold their wings away from the body and pant, flicking the tongue with each breath. First aid includes the following:

**STEP 1:** Remove the bird from all heat sources and then cool the body.
**STEP 2:** Place the bird in a cool (75-degrees-Fahrenheit) room.
**STEP 3:** Mist the feathers of alert birds with water; do not wet the feathers of a weak or unconscious bird.
**STEP 4:** Wet the bird’s feet with cool (65 to 70 degrees F) water until panting stops.
**STEP 5:** Transport the bird in a quiet, dark, cool (75-degrees Fahrenheit), well-ventilated enclosure.

**Frostbite**
Frostbite occurs in pet birds that escape into the outdoors during winter. Indoor pet birds are unable to shunt their blood properly and often suffer severe frostbite after relatively brief exposure to sub-freezing temperatures.

**STEP 1:** Gradually warm frostbitten feet or wings in a circulating water bath.
**STEP 2:** Increase the water temperature gradually (starting at 60 degrees Fahrenheit and topping out at 90 degrees Fahrenheit) over the course of 20 to 30 minutes.
**STEP 3:** Keep the bird warm and the feathers dry when possible.
**STEP 4:** Do not apply creams or ointments to the wounds until instructed to do so by the vet-

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**Burn wounds** can be an immediate threat to life. Pet birds can fall or land in a pot of **boiling water**, in a frying pan or on a hot stovetop.

**STEP 1:** Follow first aid advice for respiratory distress, vomiting, diarrhea, etc., as appropriate for the bird’s signs of illness.
**STEP 2:** Call the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center at 888-426-M35 immediately for advice on specific toxins.
**STEP 3:** Transport your bird to the veterinarian as soon as possible.

**Burns**
Burn wounds can be an immediate threat to life. Pet birds can fall or land in a pot of boiling water, in a frying pan or on a hot stovetop. Light bulbs and heat lamps can cause burns if a bird gets too close. First aid should include the following:

**STEP 1:** Remove the bird from the heat source and cool the burned body parts.
**STEP 2:** Cool the burn by placing the affected area under running cool (75-degrees-Fahrenheit) tap water for approximately one minute (60 seconds). Use good judgment to avoid causing hypothermia by excessively wetting the entire bird.
**STEP 3:** Do not use ice.
**STEP 4:** Use a towel for safe restraint and to avoid being bitten by a fearful bird in pain.

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This conure is showing severe signs of illness. It is standing on the bottom of the cage rather than perching, has constantly ruffled feathers, does not respond to voices or a light touch and has been refusing to eat for the past day.

This conure is showing severe signs of illness. It is standing on the bottom of the cage rather than perching, has constantly ruffled feathers, does not respond to voices or a light touch and has been refusing to eat for the past day.

STEP 5: Watch for color changes, swelling, bad odor, seeping fluid, loss of flexibility or hardness in the tissues, especially the beak, toes, and wings.

STEP 6: Transport the bird to the veterinarian as soon as possible. Be prepared for numerous visits over the course of several months to monitor the progression of injuries.

Eye Problems

Eye problems should be treated as soon as possible to have the best chance of saving the eye. Provide first aid for the eyes after stabilizing life-threatening problems, such as head trauma, bite wounds or bleeding.

Foreign objects impaled into the eye require veterinary care and should not be treated with first aid. Transport the bird in a dark, well-padded, secure, warm (85-degrees-Fahrenheit) enclosure for immediate treatment.

Foreign objects floating on the eye, such as food debris, seed hulls, feathers, feather dander, sand or soil, can be very irritating and can damage the cornea. Caustic substances in the eyes include cleaning products, disinfectants, cosmetics and hot liquids. Avoid causing further trauma, and do not attempt to hold the eyelids open for examination.

STEP 1: Gently restrain the bird’s head by wrapping the body and neck in a towel, and steady the head by holding the neck.

STEP 2: Flush the eye(s) with a large quantity of contact lens saline solution or sterile “eye wash.” Keep flushing until long after it seems as if the object should have been removed. Use cotton balls and cotton-tipped applicators carefully.

STEP 3: Some eye ointments (e.g., hydrocortisone) can be dangerous in birds, so eye ointment should only be used on the order of an attending veterinarian.

STEP 4: After flushing, towel the feathers dry, and transport the bird for veterinary examination in a secure, well-padded, warm (85-degrees-Fahrenheit) enclosure.

First Aid For Pain

Birds rarely tell us they are in pain; they have adapted to hiding their pain to avoid harassment by other birds or predation. Their behavior can give us hints that they are in pain, but some behaviors also occur with problems that cause lethargy, debilitation or fear. Sometimes, birds in pain can become quiet and avoid contact with people or cagemates. Important signs include reluctance to move, muscle tremors and lack of appetite. First aid for pain includes finding the source of pain and stabilizing the movement at that site. There are no over-the-counter pain medications that can be recommended without a veterinarian-client-patient relationship. (See www.avma.org/issues/policy/ethics.asp for more information.) Many internal injuries cannot be stabilized with first-aid techniques.
Wing fractures, beak fractures, leg fractures and joint diseases do lend themselves to some emergency stabilization techniques.

**Beak Fractures:**

**STEP 1:** Stabilize by preventing use. Place bird into a small, dark, closed, smooth-sided enclosure with a padded floor; no perches, no dishes, and no toys.

**STEP 2:** Transfer to veterinary care immediately in a secure, well-padded, warm (85-degrees-Fahrenheit) enclosure.

**Wing Fractures:**

If your bird fractures its wing, you can temporarily stabilize it using a stocking (if your bird is calm and easy to handle), prior to transporting it to a veterinarian. Do not struggle with your bird in an attempt to stabilize the fracture. You can train your bird to accept being restrained in this way by using positive-reinforcement techniques. Practice at least once a month by placing your bird in the stocking.

**STEP 1:** Stabilize by taping the wing tips together on top of the tail with Scotch Tape or masking tape. Do not use duct tape, electrical tape or other tape with heavy glue.

**STEP 2:** Form a body wrap out of an appropriately sized sock or stocking that will not constrict breathing movements of the chest during transfer to the veterinarian.

**STEP 3:** Pre-measure and cut before placing the sock on the bird to avoid accidentally cutting skin or feathers with scissors. Cut off the end to make a hole for the head, and cut out a hole on the side of the sock for the feet.

**STEP 4:** Roll the stocking into a circle. Place the circle over the head and gently unroll the stocking over the wings and body of the bird.

**STEP 5:** Transfer to veterinary care immediately in a secure, well-padded, warm (85-degrees-Fahrenheit) enclosure.

**Leg Fracture:**

If your bird is limping, it's possible it might have a fracture leg or its leg joints are causing it pain. Leg fractures or pained leg joints are stabilized by reducing use, so follow these steps:

**STEP 1:** Place bird into a small, dark, enclosed, smooth-sided box or aquarium with a padded floor; no perches, no dishes, and no toys. A towel can be used for padding. Cover the enclosure to reduce visual stimulus.

**STEP 2:** Transfer to veterinary care immediately in a secure, well-padded, warm (85-degrees-Fahrenheit) enclosure.

**Why First Aid Is Important**

First aid can save your bird from a life-threatening injuries and further prevent them, during transport to a qualified veterinarian. Many animal emergency hospitals accept bird patients 24-hours a day, 365 days a year, and board-certified avian veterinarians can be found in most North American metropolitan areas. Take a few moments to research your options for veterinary care in your area. Search for board certified avian veterinarians at the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners (ABVP) website at www.ABVP.com, and for veterinarians with an interest in birds at the Association of Avian Veterinarians (AAV) website at www.AAV.org.

Dr. Paul Gibbons earned a bachelor's degree from St. Louis University before attending University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine. He graduated in 1994 and then practiced in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Illinois before pursuing advanced training. At the University of California-Davis he completed a residency in avian, reptile, and exotic mammal medicine followed by a master's degree in comparative pathology. Dr. Gibbons is a staff veterinarian at the Animal Emergency Center in Wisconsin (www.animalemergencycenter.com).