

# FEATHER LOSS IN BIRDS

## PROBLEMS THAT CAN BE CAUSED BY NUMEROUS FACTORS:

- Mites, lice, bacteria, and fungal (yeast) infections
- Hormonal imbalances
- Dietary deficiencies
- Injury
- Underlying disease processes that secondarily affect the skin
- Psychological problems (boredom, etc.)

*Some of these problems are easy to correct, while others are more difficult or impossible to resolve.*

## MITES, LICE, INFECTIONS

Often these problems can be solved with dusting your bird with the appropriate insecticide or using oral medications. Diagnosis is made by examination of the feathers under the microscope, or by taking cultures of the feathers.

## HORMONAL IMBALANCES

Sometimes improper activity of the thyroid gland, ovaries, or testicles can result in feather picking. Blood tests or biopsies may be needed for a confirmed diagnosis.

## DIETARY DEFICIENCIES

A lack of protein, fatty acids, certain vitamins or minerals can result in feather loss and/or feather picking. Sometimes the fault is not in the diet, but rather your bird's ability to utilize the nutrients included in the food. A good history often provides clues as to the cause. Diet changes generally help.

## INJURIES / UNDERLYING DISEASE

Sometimes an injury or illness (gout, tumors or arthritis) can cause your bird to hurt or itch. When he or she hurts or itches, your bird may pick at the area. Generally these causes are suspected when only one area of the body is attacked. Often it is difficult to cure these individuals because the real cause is not treatable since the stress cannot be alleviated.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL

By far these are the most common causes of feather picking. These types of feather pickers can be the most difficult to cure and have the highest incidence of recurrence. Common psychological factors are:

### **Unhappiness:**

This can occur over such minor things as moving the cage to a different location or transferring the bird to a new cage. Arguments between family members can create stress feather picking as well as the disappearance of a favorite family member.

### **Boredom:**

Generally due to lack of exercise, decreased attention, or no variation in environment. Changes in the cage or more attention can and usually does help. A companion bird may be the solution (although sometimes it will make things worse!), especially if the feather picking bird is very "people oriented."



**Lack of Privacy:**

Usually seen in new birds or established birds after a new addition is made. Usually the addition of a nesting box will reduce or eliminate the problem.

**Bad Habit:**

This is often the underlying cause, just as some people bite their fingernails or pull their hair out. These are very frustrating cases to solve.

**TREATMENT**

Feather picking can vary widely but the method of stopping the behavior is initially the same whatever the cause. An ELIZABETHAN COLLAR (cone-shaped collar) is applied around the neck of the bird. It may take the bird several hours or days to adjust to the collar. During this time, the perches should be placed low in the cage and food/water should also be moved to within easy reach of the collared bird. Often the collar is left on the bird for 1-2 months!!! This is necessary to try to break the habit that the bird has developed. Often all feathers will not regrow for many months or until the bird goes through a natural molt. In severe cases, the feathers may never regrow or take years to come back.

Occasionally bitter liquids (i.e. Bitter Apple) can be sprayed on the affected area to try to dissuade the bird from picking himself. PATIENCE is very important when trying to solve feather loss problems in pet birds.

