Obesity and Overfeeding Pet Birds

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Obesity is one of the number one health problems in pet animals. As with other pets, companion birds can develop weight-related health problems.

Causes of obesity in pet birds

Overfeeding can occur quite easily for several reasons:

- Less energy expended: In the wild, birds use considerable energy in flight, foraging for food, and maintaining their body temperature. However in our heated home environment, they are kept warm, they spend little time flying, and their food is brought to them, so little energy is expended.

- Improper diet: Diets fed to pet birds may be higher in calories than those they would have in the wild. Many times pet birds are given seeds or treats high in fat, such as sunflower seeds and peanuts. High carbohydrates, such as yams and pasta can be problematic too. Fruits are generally high in sugar, and can add to the calorie content.

Too often birds on seed diets are fed by simply filling the cup with seed, often providing far more than they should really eat in a day.

Risks of obesity in pet birds

Among pet birds, budgies, and to a lesser extent, cockatiels, are very prone to obesity and the resulting problems. These include:

- Lipomas, which are benign fatty tumors. They usually form over the abdomen, but sometimes over the crop and chest as well. Xanthomas, yellow fatty tumors, may also occur.

- Liver disease in the form of fatty liver, or hepatic lipidosis. This is a serious disease and can be fatal. As fat accumulates in the liver, the normal function of the liver is decreased. Signs of liver disease may include bleeding tendencies, loss of appetite, and overgrown beaks and toenails.

- Exercise intolerance and difficulty breathing. As fat accumulates in the body, the air sacs have less room in the bird's body. As a result, an overweight bird may show some difficulty breathing or may not be able to exercise as much without tiring.

- Reproductive problems. Overweight birds may be less likely to breed and be more prone to reproductive problems such as egg binding.

- Shortened life span. As with any animal, an overweight bird is more likely to have a shortened life span, as well as a poorer quality of life. The extra weight puts a burden on multiple organs of the body as well as the legs and feet.

Helping an overweight bird

If you think your bird may be overweight, consult your veterinarian.

In most cases, switching from a seed-based diet to a formulated diet with vegetables will go a long way in slimming down your bird. For most larger pet birds, pelleted food should be 65-80% of the diet. Vegetables should make up 15-30%, and the remainder can be seeds and fruits.

Increasing your bird's opportunities for exercise can help. Purchase a larger cage and/or a play gym. Climbing ladders, playing with toys, and other activities can help remove the excess weight. Use foraging toys so your bird will have to work at getting his food.

Conclusion

Overfeeding birds can be relatively easy to do and is considered one of the most common nutritional health problems. It can lead to breeding problems, decreased organ function, and shorter life spans. Avoid overfeeding by understanding the different anatomy and physiology of birds, and feeding the proper diet. Consult with your veterinarian to determine if your bird is overweight, and what dietary modifications should be made.