

Common Household Hazards to Companion Birds

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Of all the species of birds kept commonly as pets, surely the most popular are the parrots and parakeets. Due to their outgoing and curious natures, these birds often get themselves into dangerous situations in and around the home. Any home may easily be made safer for pet birds with a little planning and common sense.

Everything becomes clear if one considers tame parrots in the same light as one would a human toddler – with the same level of curiosity and as little good sense and foresight

Unsafe Foods: A varied and properly balanced diet is probably the most important aspect of giving your pet a long, healthy life. Nevertheless many common foods may cause your bird to become ill. Unlike most fruits and veggies, avocado pear, for example is HIGHLY toxic to birds and even a small piece could poison a parrot. Remember that avo-containing products such as guacamole are just as dangerous.

Fatty foods (including too many sunflower seeds and/or peanuts), those containing preservatives, artificial flavourants, non-nutritive sweeteners etc are all out. Basically, an easy rule of thumb is: if the bird would not eat it in the wild, you shouldn't be feeding it

Many parrots will develop sour crop if allowed fresh dairy products. Yogurt is, however fine. Parrots (as they do not drink milk when young) do not have the enzyme, lactase, necessary to break down fresh milk.

Chocolate, coffee and cocoa all contain a substance named theobromine, also highly toxic to birds. Needless to say, alcohol is a no-no. Getting your bird drunk is not funny, it is irresponsible and dangerous as alcohol can cause severe liver damage.

Although they love to eat chips, crackers and other salty foods, your bird's intake of high salt foods should be very firmly limited. While perfectly fine in small doses, high salt foods in large amounts are very unhealthy, affecting both the heart and kidneys.

Remember, birds are a lot smaller than they look. For example, an African grey parrot weighs on average 350 to 400g. A human weighs on average 75kg. This means that the parrot is 200X smaller than the owner. Considered in this light, one can better appreciate that one chip for your pet is equivalent to 200 chips for you!

Which brings me to another point – giving of medications. Uninformed owners often attempt to medicate their ill birds at home, with small amounts of human medicines. This is extremely dangerous. There is no way that anyone could break off a perfect 1/200 of an aspirin and in any case, birds are highly sensitive to many medicines that are safe for people, dogs and farm animals. Always consult with a qualified veterinarian before dosing your bird with any medicines; you could easily be doing much more harm than good.

Fumes and Poisons: Due to the small size and delicate construction of their lungs, birds are extremely sensitive to toxic fumes. This is the reason why canaries were such excellent poison gas indicators in the mines of long ago. One of the most dangerous and least known of all household hazards is that of overheated Teflon. When this non-stick pan coating is overheated, it releases fumes that cause lung bleeding and acute death in birds. For this reason, do not keep your parrot near the kitchen if you use non-stick cookware (remember that some of the newer cooking bags are Teflon coated too. Other kitchen related problems include the smoke from overheated oil, aerosol oven cleaners etc. Basically, if any product smells strongly (this includes the glue used on new carpets, scented air fresheners, car fresheners, deodorants, scented candles and incense), keep your parrot away until the room has been well ventilated and the smell has dissipated. Early signs of respiratory distress involve tail bobbing, labored breathing, voice change and distress. Should this occur, immediately take the bird away from the source into a well-ventilated environment and call your vet.

Needless to say, household poisons such as insecticidal spray should never be sprayed on or even near cages and food bowls. Just breathing in the spray is dangerous. If you absolutely must use these sprays, rather use one with an odour so that you can be sure that the fumes do not reach the parrot cage. If you can smell it at all near the cage, it is too strong for the parrot. This is the disadvantage of odourless sprays. Remember too that many of these poisons have a long contact time of up to 6 weeks and may still affect a curious parrot that licks the sprayed surface weeks after you have forgotten that you ever sprayed there.

Parrots love to fiddle with and chew on pens. Their strong beaks are capable of breaking them open and getting themselves coated in sticky, staining ink.

It is important to make sure that your bird has no access to any lead or zinc containing substance. As discussed in a previous article, these substances cause Heavy Metal Poisoning when ingested. This condition is fatal if not treated in time.

Some common culprits are: wine bottle sealing foil, curtain weights, lead based paint, jewellery, disposable lighter flints, linoleum, COMPLETE LIST.

Physical Hazards: Most of these are fairly obvious. Fans may be flown into and should be turned off when the bird is loose. Electrical cables may be chewed and should be out of reach. Hot stove plates and naked light bulbs may cause burns, open bowls of water are often fun to bath in but supervision is needed to prevent drowning. Toilet lids should be closed.

Needless to say, if your bird's wings are not clipped, all doors and windows should be shut when he is out and about.

Try to place the cage in an area with more constant temperatures. Large fluctuations such as those near doors or open windows may make the bird ill.

Never fall asleep with your bird in your bed. More than one distraught owner has awoken to discover that he has rolled onto his pet in his sleep.

With their strong beaks, parrots are capable of shattering glass and plastic beads, which may subsequently cut their tongues or stomachs.

Other Animals: No matter how well trained your dog or how sleepy and indifferent your cat, a sudden instinctual impulse or ill-tempered nip could change the situation in a flash. Cats carry bacteria named *Pasteurella* in their mouths. These bacteria are normally harmless but, should a bird be bitten (or even just scratched) by a cat, the bacteria may cause a severe infection known as septicaemia. For this reason any bird that has been mouthed by a cat needs immediate veterinary attention.

Many households contain more than one companion bird. If introduced carefully to each other, these birds will often co-exist quite happily. Rarely, jealousy, frustration or seasonal change (which stimulates breeding behaviour) will cause fighting amongst the birds. For this reason birds of different species should only be allowed to be together under supervision and should never be forced to share the same cage at night.

Be aware that male cockatoos have been known to attack and kill their mates even after years of peaceful coexistence.

Toxic plants: There is very little information available regarding which houseplants are specifically toxic to birds. The following list is one of common household ornamentals that have been linked to poisonings in one animal species or another. Many bird species appear particularly resistant to plant toxins. Nevertheless, birds should never be allowed to chew on or play with any plant until you are sure that it is safe. Possible problem plants include: *solanum* (Jerusalem Cherry), *schlefflera* (Umbrella tree), *azalea*, *rhododendron*, Mother in Laws Tongue, *philodendron*, Avocado Pear, *kalanchoe*, *euphorbia*, *dracaena*, *dieffenbachia*, *Oleander* and Periwinkle.

Safe and Unsafe Toys: Toys are extremely important for the psychological well-being of companion birds, especially the parrots, who would naturally spend most of their day in the search for food. This would involve hours of moving through the trees, looking, touching and tasting for edible items. Many parrots build nests by chewing holes in tree trunks. This means that even although your parrot may never have had to search for food or build a nest, he has evolved with powerful drives to explore, taste, and touch any attractive object around him. What all this boils down to is that parrots NEED toys. They also NEED toys that are destructible. Parrots enjoy breaking things (as you may have noticed if you own one!). Being allowed to reduce a toy to sawdust gives them great satisfaction and markedly reduces the frustration and boredom suffered by many of our feathered friends. There are, however a few points to consider when choosing safe and suitable toys for your bird: firstly, is the size appropriate? A toy may be perfectly safe for a macaw and be deadly for the lovebird that gets his head trapped in one of the links of the suspending chain. Curious birds will often try to push their heads/beaks/tongues into any available crack or gap, thus getting themselves stuck. There have been several reports of lovebirds getting their beaks stuck in the open section of the little round bells often seen in cages. Rope toys are excellent but should be replaced when the rope begins to fray, as legs may become trapped in the fibres, leading to panic and sometimes even severe injuries.

The next point to consider is the substance making up the toy. Be wary of allowing birds to chew on chains, wires etc that may pose the threat of heavy metal toxicity. Some older plastics are toxic especially when pieces are chewed off and swallowed.

Also be aware that especially the larger parrots have immensely powerful beaks and may break glass or brittle plastic beads into sharp pieces, capable of lacerating the tongue or guts. One last point to be aware of is that some birds will develop the habit of chewing off pieces of fluff on stuffed toys, fluffy blankets etc and this may, rarely become lodged in the stomach or intestines.

Commercially available toys are, on the whole safe but always use your own good judgment before choosing any new toy.

This article is not intended to scare you, or make you subject your feathered friend to days on end of caged boredom, but rather to highlight some of the many hidden hazards in and around the home, in order for you to be able to maximize the safety of your own situation. No one has the perfect, parrot friendly home but often just a few small changes and adjustments can prevent accidents and give you many years of joy together.