

## WILDSIDE VETERINARY HEALTH CENTER

### Handout: Feather destructive behavior



Feather destructive behavior (also called feather picking) happens when birds damage their feathers with their beak. This is not a disease by itself, but a symptom of an underlying problem.

Feather picking can cause baldness, and in severe cases it can damage the skin and even muscles.

Left unchecked, feather picking has serious consequences. Besides causing baldness or a lack of nice feathers, feather picking affects a bird's ability to keep itself warm, can cause bleeding, infections, and permanent damage to the feather follicle, thus preventing normal regrowth.

This can progress to an obsessive-compulsive disorder, making treatment much more difficult.

### **Causes**

Causes are divided into medical and non-medical. Several can contribute to feather picking at the same time.

#### ***Non-medical causes***

- Environmental
  - Nutritional deficiency
  - Airborne and/or topical toxins
  - Low humidity
  - Small cage or poor cage design
  - Overcrowding
  - Social isolation
  - Unable to perform natural behaviors
  - Hand-rearing and improper socialization
  - Unpredictable environment
- Behavioral
  - Individual personality
  - Boredom
  - Stress
  - Anxiety or phobia
  - Sleep deprivation
  - Attention-seeking behavior
  - Sexual frustration

#### ***Medical Causes***

- Primary feather and skin diseases
  - Viral diseases
  - Bacterial or fungal skin infections
  - Feather dysplasia (abnormal feather growth)
- Any disease that causes pain, discomfort, irritation or itch.

### **Diagnosis**

Diagnosing the underlying cause(s) of feather picking can be a long process.

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A thorough history of your bird's behavior and environment is crucial as a first step towards diagnosing the cause. After that a full physical exam is performed and further testing is recommended. These can include bloodwork, x-rays, skin biopsies, and more. These tests are tailored to your individual bird.

#### Treatment

Realistically, eliminating feather picking in each bird is not possible. Feather picking is a complex problem with different contributing factors. A reduction in the amount of feather picking can be considered a success.

The basis for several treatment strategies is to provide your bird with healthy, more desirable alternatives to feather picking. Feather picking serves a purpose to your bird. It can help birds cope with boredom, stress, anxiety and other unpleasant feelings. Treatment plans are designed to address the underlying reason of why your bird is picking. How they do so should be tailored to your bird and your lifestyle. The most impressive treatment plans will fail if they cannot be carried out.

#### Different Therapeutic Strategies

- Medical treatment depends on the cause
- Environmental enrichment
  - Foraging so the bird has to physically and mentally work to get food
  - Physical objects for play such as toys, swings, ladders, mirrors
  - Physical space to allow flying, running, swimming
  - Sensory enrichment to use bird's sense of sight, hearing, smell and touch, such as having a "Room with a view," background noises, videos, cage proximity to people
  - Social interaction with people, or other birds if he/she has a mate.
  - Encourage problem solving, learning, and controlling some feature in the bird's environment
  - Free flight in house

A lot of work and time go into creating a treatment plan and carrying it out. It is important to work closely with us. Some strategies are slowly introduced to prevent over-stimulation, stress, and other risks. Depending on your bird's response and what works best, your treatment plan will change as time goes on.

#### Temporary Fixes

Temporary measures that reduce feather picking include Elizabethan collars, neck braces, fabric jackets or vests, and applying foul-tasting substances to the areas being picked. These tactics are not solutions. Your bird is still upset, agitated, or sick and will feather pick if given the chance.

#### Prognosis

Feather picking requires a fair amount of persistence and patience from both the owner and veterinarian. Despite an excellent treatment plan and teamwork, success may mean only a reduction of feather picking rather than eliminating it entirely. Catching it early improves the chance of success.

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Let us know if you have any questions!  
Sincerely,

Wildside Veterinary team