

Caring For Your Senior Bird

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Older birds, sometimes referred to as "senior" or "geriatric" birds, often have special needs and health care requirements. The life span of some common avian species are shown below.

Species	Common Life Span in Captivity (Years)	Possible Life Span in Captivity When Provided Good Husbandry and Veterinary Care (Years)
Zebra Finch	4-7	>10
Budgerigar	8-10	Teens
Canary	6-12	15+
Cockatiel	10-12	20+
Lovebirds	8-14	20+
Pionus	30-40	>40
African Grey Parrot	50	>60
Large Cockatoos	50	>60
Amazon Parrot	>50	>60
Small Macaws	50-60	>75
Large Macaws	60	>75

Nutrition

Malnutrition is common in pet birds, and signs of it may not appear for years. It is one of the most common reasons pet birds may die prematurely. The most common conditions related to malnutrition in senior birds are:

- **Abnormal weight:** Psittacine birds (birds in the parrot family) fed seed-only or primarily seed diets are more likely to become overweight as they grow older. Other factors leading to obesity include slower metabolism in older birds, less activity, and more rarely some metabolic disorders such as hypothyroidism. Obesity may result in a distended abdomen, difficulty breathing, decreased ability to tolerate heat, overgrown beaks, and visible fat underneath the skin.

For a few older birds, the opposite may be true, and they may lose weight. This may be due to other problems such as arthritis, which makes them less likely to move to the food dish or be unable to grasp food with their feet.

- **Vitamin A deficiency:** Also known as hypovitaminosis A, Vitamin A deficiency can often occur as a result of psittacine birds eating a seed-only or primarily seed diet. Symptoms can be subtle or severe and include sneezing, nasal discharge, wheezing, crusted and/or plugged nostrils, lethargy, depression, diarrhea, egg binding and dystocia, tail-bobbing, lack of appetite, emaciation (severe weight loss), poor feather



color, swollen eyes, ocular discharge, gagging, foul-smelling breath, white patches, or a "slimy" appearance to the mouth.



- Calcium deficiency: Calcium deficiency is more common in African Greys, who have a higher dietary need for Vitamin D. Again, seed-only diets can be the culprit.

Nervous system and eyes

Some species, such as the African Greys, cockatiels and Amazon parrots appear to be more prone to atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries), which can lead to central nervous system (CNS) signs such as seizures.

Cataracts can occur in senior birds, especially parrots. Watch for signs of loss of vision, squinting, or redness of the eye. Unlike humans, in which cataracts often take years to form, cataracts may develop very quickly (within weeks) in some birds and rapidly lead to blindness.

In older birds, the iris of the eye may become lighter in color.

>Behavior changes

As birds age, they may show behavior changes such as:

- Increased sleeping
- Less activity
- Less vocalizing

Some of these normal age-related changes may be identical to those you would see if your bird was sick. If you notice behavior changes, it is best to have your bird examined by a veterinarian to determine the cause.

Mobility

Arthritis can be observed in many senior birds. This may be seen as reduced flexibility, reluctance to fly, swollen joints, sitting on the bottom of the cage, or even loss of balance. If you see these signs in your bird, have her checked by your veterinarian. Flexible perches, sitting platforms, and other physical aids may help. In addition, your veterinarian may prescribe medications if the condition is severe.

Liver disease

Especially in older birds who are overweight, [hepatic lipidosis](#) (fatty liver) can occur. Signs of fatty liver include loss of appetite, lethargy, depression, distended abdomen, difficulty breathing, poor feather quality, diarrhea, and abnormal droppings (green in color). Birds may have poor feather quality. If the liver function is greatly decreased, birds may develop central nervous system signs such as seizures, loss of balance, and muscle tremors. This is a very serious disease and can greatly affect how the bird can respond to other health problems. If your bird shows signs of a fatty liver or is overweight, make an appointment with your veterinarian.

Skin and feathers

In some senior birds, the colors of the feathers may change, and become paler. Birds should also be monitored for any feather picking. If an older bird has arthritis, it may affect his ability to preen, so also watch for feathers that remain out of place, are "unzipped", or are not kept clean.

Kidney disease

Geriatric birds may develop kidney disease. This can be associated with hypovitaminosis A, or other illnesses. Signs generally include depression and lethargy, fluffing of the feathers, weakness, increased drinking, watery droppings, loss of weight and appetite, and dehydration. Kidney disease may be able to be managed successfully if diagnosed early.

Heart and respiratory disease

Older birds, especially those who have lived in environments where there is second hand smoke may develop chronic problems with their air sacs and lungs. Some birds may also develop heart problems, in which case the bird may have 'fainting spells', difficulty breathing, and an enlarged abdomen.

Helping Your Aging Bird
Your senior bird relies on you to provide for his special needs. His quality and length of life, in a large part, depend on you. You can help make the "golden years" of your bird the very best if you:

- Provide good nutrition
- Provide a quality environment (ease of access to food and water, temperature, proper perches, etc.)
- Perform regular personal examinations of your bird and her droppings
- Schedule veterinary exams at a minimum of every year and have laboratory tests, a body weight check, etc. performed as recommended by your

veterinarian

- Familiarize yourself with signs and symptoms of diseases commonly seen in older birds and have your bird examined by your veterinarian if you notice any of these signs