



## Royal Animal Hospital

### Why is my parrot going bald & plucking its feathers?

If your parrot starts plucking, do not wait. Take action now. A feather plucking problem can become a chronic habit which is difficult to change. Parrots can end up looking like supermarket chickens if their owners don't move fast.

Start by finding a vet who has an interest in parrots. You should start with a thorough veterinary investigation in case feather plucking is a sign of severe illness.

Feather plucking can be caused by a range of different problems. These may be medical, dietary or behavioural, sometimes it can be a mixture of several of these. You will need, therefore, to investigate the bird's medical condition, its diet, its environment and its psychological needs. Only when you have ruled out medical problems, diet, and environment should you look at its psychological needs. So start with the vet and only call in a behaviourist if you have ruled out everything else.



Many parrot owners still feed their parrot in a way which was thought to be OK twenty years ago but now is known to be inadequate. Parrot knowledge has moved on and they have not kept up to date. We know more now than we did. OK so you will have to spend some money but if you let your parrot pluck for months and months, it may be impossible to stop it. These are expensive and sensitive birds and they deserve good care. If you can't afford to give them good care, then maybe you should hand them over to somebody who can.

#### What are the medical causes for feather plucking?

1. Allergies either to food or to something inhaled. Possibilities include sunflower seeds, house mites and feather dust. Interdermal skin tests will help identify.
2. Mites not very common, though everybody starts with this. Put a white sheet over the cage at night and if you see little grains of sand' running around in the morning, it's mites.

3. Internal parasites such as worms, protozoa or giardia (common in cockatiels who develop an allergy to the bug).
4. Preen gland is not working.
5. Liver disease from a high fat diet. Very common in birds that are eating mainly sunflower seeds and peanuts. Symptoms green discoloration of the white bit of the faeces or undigested seed in faeces. (A good stool should have a well formed coloured bit, a white section, and a watery section).
6. Chlamyophilosis (formerly called psitticosis). This can be latent and it only emerges due to stress. Potentially fatal to humans which is another reason for going straight to an avian vet for a quick blood test.
7. Dermatitis or folliculitis infections of skin or feather follicles. This may be the cause or the effect of plucking. It includes ringworm, fungal infections, and bacterial infections. Love birds get polyfolliculitis where two feathers grow from one follicle.
8. Psittacine beak and feather disease. Symptoms: black and shiny beak, black feet, fret lines along feathers, clubbed feathers in sheath, loss of crest feathers on head.
9. Septicemia or air sacculitis infections.  
Hypothyroidism leads to loss of feathers, rather than plucking,
10. Other medical possibilities tumours or cancers, pain, rickets and arthritic pain, cysts.



### What are the dietary reasons for feather plucking?

1. Poor feeding. The bird may be given a seed mix (nothing that comes out of an open sack in a pet shop is a good diet) but it is only eating the peanuts and sunflower seeds. It becomes calcium deficient, and vitamin A deficient. The bird may have been eating this for some time before symptoms are apparent. Symptoms may include fits. Change to a pellet diet of the specific kind for the species. See notes later in this sheet. "Owners only notice the bird is ill when it is 70 per cent dead," says a vet.
2. Aspergillus fungus in the peanuts and sunflowers poisons the bird. Abnormal wear on the bottom of the toes. Change to a pellet diet of the specific kind for the species.

### **What are the environmental reasons for feather plucking?**

1. Tobacco smoke.
2. Dry environment - i.e. the bird starts plucking when the central heating goes on. Or the cage is too dry because it's in the sun. Bathe or spray the bird daily.
3. Not enough ultra violet light. A parrot needs 45 minutes daylight not through glass. Build an outside aviary and put the bird there while you are out. If you can't do this, ask your vet for help via diet. Try calcium and vitamin D3 supplements.
4. Excessive light. A bird needs ten to twelve hours in darkness each night. Are you keeping it awake too late while you watch TV?
5. Zinc or lead poisoning from something the bird is chewing. Symptoms; blood in watery part of dropping and/or abnormal feather colours.

### **What are the psychological causes for feather plucking?**

1. Boredom. In the wild a parrot spends 50 % of its time flying and feeding, 30% playing, 20% preening.
2. Separation anxiety. This is made worse if the bird is left in a silent house. Keep radio/TV on in absence. Use behaviour training to calm the bird. Mix up the departure signals. I.e. departure signals such as goodbye, picking up keys, shutting doors should be done without leaving. It is not appropriate to keep a parrot alone in a house all day, so you may wish to consider re-homing the bird if you cannot spend the amount of time needed to be with it.
3. Attention seeking. If the bird is not getting enough attention, the fault lies with the keeper, not the parrot. The bird should have several hours each day out of the cage with its keeper. These parrots often vocalise when plucking to get the human's attention. Ignore the plucking and leave the room may have to do this 200 to 300 times.
4. Overcrowding. Dominant love birds may pluck subordinates.
5. Environmental change. Institutionalised parrots hate change so change things very slowly. A heavy change may set off feather plucking. Even a new vase or Christmas decorations can set off feather plucking. Be particularly careful of any new item which is high in the room parrots fear high flying predators.
6. Stressful things such as Wildlife TV programmes, domestic arguments, silence, pictures higher up on wall with staring eyes. A parrot's cage is a security place and

therefore should not be in the middle of the room; better in the corner or against a wall.

7. Sexual frustration made worse by a high fat diet. Plucking sometimes starts with sexual maturity at the age of two or three years. The bird tries to pair-bond with owner, who refuses these advances, and the bird is frustrated or jealous of the owner's own pair bond. Hand reared birds may be particularly likely to do this. Ways to reduce this sexual frustration include obedience training for parrots which helps bird see you as parent not partner, reducing daylight hours to 10, feeding a less rich diet.

Encourage the bird to take part in activities, which are mutually exclusive of plucking. i.e. playing with toys, preferably destructible toys which it can tear apart; using a dummy nest box; being with you while you are doing other things.