

MANAGING CHRONIC EGG-LAYING IN YOUR PET BIRD

INTRODUCTION

Chronic egg-laying is a common problem in pet birds and occurs when a bird lays more eggs than is normal during a given period of time. Although any species can be affected, it is most common in cockatiels, budgies, lovebirds, canaries, finches, and chickens. Contrary to what many people think, female birds can lay eggs without having a male available with which to mate. Often, the bird perceives a person in the family or an object (such as a toy in their cage) to be her perceived mate. Chronic egg-laying can lead to many severe medical problems such as egg-binding, egg-yolk collecting inside the abdomen, and fractured bones due to calcium loss. Because of these potential medical problems, it is important that you work together with your avian veterinarian to reduce, or even better to stop completely, egg production in your feathered friend.



What You Can Do at Home

There are many things that you can do at home to try to reduce the number of eggs your bird lays.

- **Providing Enrichment**

The busier and more engaged we keep our birds, the less time they have to think about reproduction. Enrichment opportunities can be provided with a large variety of bird safe toys, captive foraging (ask your avian veterinarian for the AAV handout on Captive Foraging), and trick training/play.

- **Changing the Environment**

Birds need to feel secure to breed. If you can move your bird to a different place in the house and change her cage around a bit, this might provide enough incentive for her to stop laying eggs.



- **Removing Perceived Mates**

Birds will often try to find ways to mimic their natural environments; thus, they may try to find something to act as a mate whether or not one is available. Pet birds often consider one or more of the people in their family as a perceived mate, toys or certain perches in the cage can also act as stand-ins, and lastly, other birds in the household may be perceived mates. Try to minimize the chances of the bird bonding to a specific person or bird. For example, try to reduce physical contact (e.g. cuddling, petting) with one particular person that the bird thinks of as a mate, and instead focus on other activities such as trick training. Similarly, increasing socialization time with individuals the bird doesn't perceive as a mate provides a good way of mimicking "flock behavior" rather than "mate behavior." Try to restrict petting to the bird's head as petting elsewhere on the body may be interpreted as mating or pair bonding by your bird. Sometimes, the bird will consider a toy or other object (e.g. mirror) in its cage as a mate and regurgitate to it or masturbate on it. If this consists of a single, particular object or toy, its removal may prove helpful. However, in some cases a bird will masturbate on anything (food dishes, toys, perches, etc.), in which case this may not be possible.



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What You Can Do at Home Continued...

- **Removing Nests or Nesting Material**

If your bird is spending time at the bottom of the cage shredding newspapers or paper towels, these must be removed. Contact paper can be applied onto the bottom of the cage for easier daily cleaning of droppings and food. Newspaper or paper towels can be used when the bird is not trying to lay eggs. Nest boxes should only be provided when breeding is a goal; birds often find creative places to nest such as in boxes, under side tables, etc., so try to prevent access to any areas you bird is trying to turn into her nest.

- **Leaving Eggs in the Cage as Long as the Bird is Interested in Them**

This will allow the bird to try to go through her normal behaviors after laying the eggs. If she is actively sitting on a clutch of eggs, she is less likely to continue laying. If her eggs keep being taken away, she may continue to lay eggs until she has what would be a full clutch of eggs for her species. If the bird has absolutely no interest in the eggs, they can be taken away. If your bird is sitting on the eggs at the bottom of the cage, make sure her food and water are easily accessible and monitor her carefully to ensure that she is eating and drinking sufficiently. Dummy eggs are available for purchase online and can sometimes be used in place of real eggs if the real eggs are getting broken.

- **Decreasing Day-length**

Many bird species lay eggs when day-lengths are long (i.e. in the summer). By making your bird think it is winter, you may be able to reduce the number of eggs being laid. Depending on the species involved, increasing perceived nighttime to around 14 hours can achieve this effect; if any light is available during the dark period, this will not work. A walk-in closet or guest-bathroom may work best for providing complete darkness for this length of time. However, since birds don't usually eat in the dark, it is important to monitor your bird's weight to make sure she is not losing too much. Some birds (e.g. cockatiels) breed during the rainy season and may initiate egg-laying when it is raining. Though we cannot control the rain, if you have a fountain near your bird or flowing water your bird can hear, this may increase her egg-laying so try to remove the sound of water if possible.

Nutrition

In addition to trying to reduce the number of eggs laid, it is important to make sure your bird is fed a good diet; an all seed diet increases the risk of egg-binding and fractured bones due to malnutrition. Ideally, we'd like small birds (cockatiels, lovebirds, and budgies) that are chronic egg-layers to have 50% of their diet be a pelleted diet, 25% good quality seed and 25% be healthy fruits and veggies. For larger birds we recommend a diet of 75-80% pellets, with the rest of the diet consisting of healthy veggies,



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fruits, and small amounts of whole grains; larger parrots should have no more than 10% of their diet consisting of seeds and nuts. **If your bird is not currently eating a pelleted diet, please**



Cuttlebone

consult with your avian veterinarian about how to make this change safely. A calcium source such as cuttlebone should always be available to birds that are in lay so that they have the option to increase their calcium intake in addition to what they receive in their regular diet.

Medical Treatment

Despite your best efforts, your bird may continue to be a chronic egg-layer even though you have followed all the recommendations for environmental changes. In these cases, or if your bird has become sick from egg-laying, medical treatments are needed.

- **Calcium Supplementation**

Egg-laying requires a HUGE amount of calcium, most of which is used to make the shell. Birds, especially those on a calcium poor diet such as seed, can quickly become calcium depleted, leading to serious medical problems. Thus, it can be helpful to supply additional calcium to your bird **when she is actively laying**. Calcium supplementation can be prescribed by your veterinarian if needed. Keep in mind that when your bird is NOT laying, the calcium supplementation should be stopped or it can potentially cause kidney problems in your bird. Small birds should have access to a cuttlebone or other source of additional calcium at all times.

- **Hormone Therapy**

The use of hormones to control chronic egg-laying is best reserved for emergency situations or when all other behavioral adjustments have failed. While they can be very effective at stopping egg production temporarily, the potential risk of egg binding does not go away. Talk to your avian veterinarian for more information on this topic.

Surgical Treatment

“Spaying” your bird is the most definitive way to stop egg-laying and it can be life-saving in emergencies. However, there are downsides to this procedure and it is rarely used as a preventative procedure. First, it is often costly. Second, there can be significant surgical and anesthetic risks. Finally, at present when we “spay” a bird we only remove the oviduct and uterus and leave the ovary in place as ovarian removal is considered higher risk. As a result, we estimate that in about 10% of birds, the ovary will continue to try to release ovum into the belly with nowhere to go. These birds then have egg yolk in their abdomen and can develop egg yolk coelomitis, which can be life threatening. While this complication does not occur in most birds, it is important that you are aware of the risks.

When to Call Your Veterinarian

Chronic egg-laying can lead to many secondary health problems. Please contact your avian veterinarian immediately:

- if your bird has been attempting to lay an egg for a prolonged period of time
- if she has been straining or is not passing any droppings
- if your bird is bleeding from the vent or there is blood on the droppings
- if you notice tissue protruding from the vent
- if your bird is lethargic
- if your bird is sitting fluffed at the bottom of the cage
- if she is breathing heavily or having difficulty breathing
- or if your bird is not eating well.

Please also contact your avian veterinarian (though it is not usually an emergency) if your bird’s eggs become abnormal in any way such as being soft-shelled, malformed, or even if they have become smaller as these changes can indicate problems to come.



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AAV: Setting a Standard in Avian Care Since 1980

Avian medicine is a distinct and very specialized field that requires extensive training, advanced skills, and facilities specifically designed and equipped to treat and hospitalize birds. The Association of Avian Veterinarians was established to provide veterinarians with this special education, and to keep them up to date with the latest information on bird health. The AAV holds an annual conference on avian medicine and publishes the peer-reviewed *Journal of Avian Medicine and Surgery*. AAV also makes annual contributions toward avian conservation and sponsors studies advancing the understanding of avian medicine.

For More Information

For more information on birds, ask your veterinarian for copies of the following AAV Client Education Brochures:

- Avian Chlamydiosis and Psittacosis
- Veterinary Care for Your Pet Bird*
- Basic Care for Companion Birds*
- Behavior: Normal and Abnormal
- Caring for Backyard Chickens
- Digital Scales
- Feather Loss
- Feeding Birds
- Injury Prevention and Emergency Care
- Managing Chronic Egg-laying in Your Pet Bird
- Signs of Illness in Companion Birds*
- Ultraviolet Lighting for Companion Birds
- When Should I Take My Bird to a Veterinarian?*
- Zoonotic Diseases in Backyard Poultry*

*Available in multiple languages. All others are available in English only at this time.

Online Resources

Follow AAV on Facebook (www.facebook.com/aavonline) for great tips and the latest news for pet bird owners. You can also find us on Twitter (@aavonline) and YouTube!

Our website, www.aav.org, offers a Find-a-Vet tool to help pet bird owners locate avian veterinarians around the world. We also offer a variety of resources such as basic bird care instructions and more. Visit the website today!