

Do's & Don'ts of Avian First Aid

There are a host of emergencies that require first aid in pet birds ranging from animal attacks, egg binding, and breathing difficulties to fractures, head trauma, and smoke inhalation.



What is first aid?

First aid is the initial treatment given to an injured or ill bird during an emergency. The goal of first aid is to stabilize the bird until veterinary medical care can be provided. First aid is **not** a substitute for qualified avian veterinary care.

What is considered a medical emergency?

A medical emergency is any serious, potentially life-threatening injury or illness that requires immediate attention.

Contact your veterinarian **immediately** if you observe...

- Bleeding that does not stop
- Difficulty breathing
- Extensive burns
- Loss of balance
- Deep cut or puncture wound
- Straining to pass droppings or an egg
- Ingestion or exposure to any potential poison
- Blood in droppings or regurgitated fluid

Contact your veterinarian the **same day** if you observe:

- Loss of appetite
- Eye injury or irritation
- Swallow a foreign object
- Fluffed and ruffled appearance
- Lameness or drooped wing(s)
- Diarrhea
- Self-mutilation
- Sudden swellings anywhere on the body
- Evidence of excessive thirst and/or urination

Be prepared

In order to serve as your bird's first responder, it is important that you are familiar with what is **normal** for your bird—so that you are able recognize abnormal.

- How much does your bird eat and drink on a daily basis?
- How much does your bird weigh? (Weigh your bird regularly using a gram scale).
- How many droppings does your bird usually pass in a day?
- What is the appearance of these droppings? (Just as in any animal, the normal bird can occasionally pass an abnormal dropping. This is a problem when abnormal droppings are passed consistently).
- What behaviors and sounds does your bird make on a daily basis?

Your avian veterinarian can also show you the correct way to **safely** capture and hold your bird to prevent injury to you and your bird. If you cannot adequately restrain your bird, you will be unable to safely evaluate injuries.

You will also want to have a first aid kit and other supplies available. Keep all equipment close together in one convenient place including a home hospital cage, gram scale, towel for capture and restraint, and a first aid kit.

Home hospital cage

The hospital cage or makeshift incubator is one of the most important items you will need in case of an emergency. To create a hospital cage, you will need...

- Cage, crate, or aquarium
- Food and water containers
- Perches
- Paper
- Heating pad or heat tapes (DO NOT use a lamp as this can burn the skin and dry mucus membranes all while disrupting your bird's normal day/night rhythm)
- Thermometer

The hospital cage can also serve as the carrier to transport your bird to the veterinarian, if need be.

First aid kit

The first aid kit can include the following equipment:

• Antiseptic solution (e.g. Betadine)	Dilute solution is used to clean wounds
• Band-Aids	In case you are injured
• Contact information	For your avian veterinarian and the poison control center
• Cotton balls	
• Cotton-tipped applicators	Used to apply medications and clean wounds
• Eye wash or contact lens irrigating solution	Used to rinse foreign objects from eyes or wounds.
• Gauze	
• Hydrogen peroxide	Helps to remove blood from feathers
• Latex gloves	To protect hands & to prevent the spread of bacteria to wounds while cleaning.
• Light	Penlight or even a flashlight to improve visibility
• Metal nail file	Can be used to smooth broken beaks and nails
• Rubbing alcohol	
• Scissors	
• Styptic gel or powder	NEVER apply styptic gel or powder to major wounds, vent, inside of the mouth, or to the eyes or eyelids.
• Topical antibiotic spray or cream	
• Tweezers	To remove debris from wounds, splinters, and ticks
• Writing pad and pen	Take notes on your observations & treatments. Do not rely upon your memory in a stressful situation.

Supportive care

Most, but not all emergencies (*see head trauma below*) will benefit from general supportive care:

- Place your bird in the hospital cage, providing supplemental heat (target 85 F or 29.4 C)
- Provide easy access to food and water.
- Provide normal ambient light during the day to stimulate eating and drinking.
- Keep your bird calm and quite. No handling unless absolutely necessary.
- Monitor your pet for changes in condition.

Specific advice for specific emergencies:

Animal attacks

Seek veterinary attention immediately, even if your bird looks normal after an attack or the physical contact appeared light. Puncture wounds can be subtle and bites can also cause crushing and internal injury.

Bleeding

Determine the source of the bleeding. If the bleeding is minimal, place your bird in the hospital cage and observe to see if the bleeding stops on its own. Schedule a veterinary appointment for any additional medical treatment that may be necessary.

If the bleeding does not stop within 5 minutes, first aid should be initiated. Manually restrain your pet, using the safe techniques demonstrated by your veterinarian...

- *Minor skin wounds:* Apply firm, gentle, continuous pressure for at least 1-2 minutes.
- *Broken blood feather:* Apply styptic gel/powder and direct pressure for 1-2 minutes. Do not pull the blood feather. This is a painful, traumatic procedure only rarely performed by avian with proper equipment, pain medication, and/or anesthesia available.
- *Bleeding beak/nail:* Wipe away the blood, provide general supportive care (*see above*), and monitor for 1 hour (*see below*).

After bleeding has stopped, observe your bird for approximately 1 hour to be sure bleeding does not recur. Schedule a veterinary appointment for any additional medical treatment that may be necessary.

If you cannot stop the bleeding, if bleeding recurs, or if your bird is weak and listless, contact your avian veterinarian immediately.

Head trauma

Head trauma usually occurs from flying into a wall, mirror, window, or ceiling fan. Affected birds can demonstrate depression, loss of balance, weakness, seizures, or even loss of consciousness.

Even if your bird seems fine at first, potentially fatal problems can develop later so take head trauma very seriously. Transfer your pet to the hospital cage, remove perches, and pad the cage bottom with a large towel.

Contact your avian veterinarian immediately and in the meanwhile:

DO NOT provide supplemental heat (which can cause more swelling in the brain and therefore worsen neurologic problems).

DO dim the lights or cover most of the cage.

DO keep your bird calm and quiet.

References and further reading

Burkett G. Avian first aid. Proc Annu Conference American Federation of Aviculture

Burkett G. Avian First Aid DVD.

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