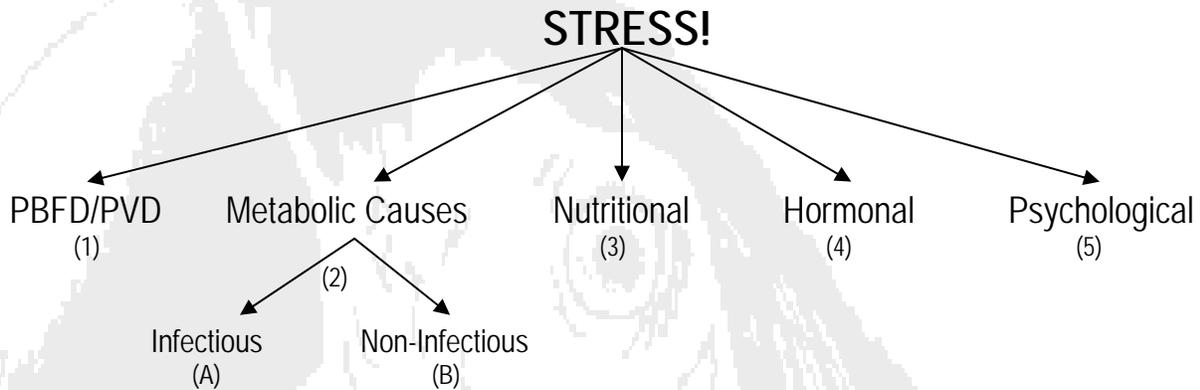




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Feather "Picking" – What Really Causes it?



Simply put ---- > **Feather-picking** is "The end manifestation of undue stress placed upon a bird by one or several conditions". These conditions are divided into FIVE main categories.

Definition

"Feather-picking" has mild, moderate, or severe presentations. Mild picking may manifest itself as chewing a few feathers or wing tips, while moderate cases involve plucking and removing feathers. The worst form is termed "Mutilation Syndrome", where birds actually inflict wounds in their skin and muscle possibly causing life-threatening situations such as bleeding, nerve or muscle damage, and severe infections.

Primary etiological groups (refer to above flowchart):

- (1) **Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease (Pbfd)/Polyoma Virus (PVD)** – Pbfd affects the immune system of the bird and in one presentation actually causes the necrosis (death) of the feather follicle and its eventual loss from the body. There is an accurate blood test to determine if a bird is a carrier whether the bird is symptomatic or non-symptomatic. Another virus, Polyoma, has been shown to cause feather loss as well, but is more prevalent in juvenile birds with adults more likely acting as carriers. There is a blood test as well as a vaccine for Polyoma disease.
- (2) **Metabolic Causes** – These are causes that affect internal organ structures and can be sub-classified as (A) Infectious and (B) Non-infectious in their origins.
 - (A) **Infectious Metabolic** – Any infectious agent (i.e. Chlamydia, bacterial, fungal, parasitic) that can damage an internal organ and/or cause enough stress on the bird to lead to a feather picking syndrome, even though it may only show up as "ratty-looking" feathers.
 - (B) **Non-infectious Metabolic** – These are substances that are in the environment that can do harm to our pet birds. Examples: Heavy metal poisoning (Lead, Zinc, Copper), Nicotine poisoning from second hand smoke, heart disease with decreased blood flow to various organs and chronic nutritional imbalances are only some of the causes which may present as feather picking. Sometimes the bird will "attack" the site of pain on the skin relating to the injured organ system in a predictable way. Most of these causes can be detected via blood tests, radiographs or other specialty laboratory tests.



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- (3) **Nutritional** – This is purposefully located in the center of the diagram as the fulcrum between physical causes and mental/hormonal (sexual) causes. Nutrition alone can affect ALL organs and exaggerate any other malady of the body. The skin and feathers make up the largest organ system in the body and as such will reflect a lack of proper nutrients, similar to hair and nails in humans. Imbalances in Vitamin A, amino acids, calcium, trace minerals, Vitamin B and excess fats have all been shown to influence feather conditioning.
- (4) **Hormonal** – Many birds (male and female) with rising hormone levels as they mature can exhibit “sexual frustration” or “Obsessive Compulsive Disorders (OCD)” with the subsequent sign of feather picking. This may occur only seasonally (sometimes accompanied by increased aggression) in response to the “breeding season” for that species. However, this together with Psychological causes (#5 below) have been found to explain less than 25% of “feather picking” or “exaggerated preening behavior”. Today, there are several options to treat these cases and minimize the effects of hormones on a bird’s mental state, including hormone therapy, neutering and/or mood-modulating drugs.
- (5) **Psychological** – The mind is a powerful organ that takes in various environmental experiences through the senses and attempts to make logic out of it. Sometimes this logic mechanism short circuits and the only way the bird knows how to deal with life’s anxieties is to take out his or her “problems” upon it’s own body. Some of the worst self-mutilation cases seen at The BIRD Clinic have been diagnosed as an “acute psychotic episode”.

Diagnostic Protocol

A good medical history is crucial to all feather picking cases. The overall goal is to perform tests to rule out the common/likely causes in a methodical manner based on history and a physical examination. With an organized medical plan, an answer can often be achieved without missing a key area. Various testing can include blood panels, viral testing, radiographs, chlamydia testing, heavy metal testing, DNA sexing, as well as diet and nutritional evaluation. A diary of events leading to the symptoms composed by the owner of the affected bird can be a VERY valuable tool in dealing with hormonal and psychological causes.

Since most birds presented to The BIRD Clinic have a chronic history of picking, time is of the essence since, in general, for every day a bird picks, it takes at least one day to repair the damage.

In conclusion, the situation of “feather picking”, “exaggerated preening”, and “mutilation syndrome” is NOT simple at all. The key point to remember is that feather picking is only a “symptom”, not a “diagnosis”. However, with today’s technology, experience, and owner’s patience, most birds can have dramatic improvements, but FIRST a proper diagnosis must be reached, the proper medication selected, and the proper environmental changes achieved.

*This publication is part of The BIRD C News™ series to help educate bird owners. Produced by The BIRD Clinic Veterinary Corporation
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