

CHRONIC EGG LAYING IN PET BIRDS

Continuous egg laying in pet birds can be a significant problem leading to life threatening conditions such as depletion of calcium, egg binding (eggs stuck in the reproductive tract), reproductive infections and behavioural problems such as aggression. The most common birds involved are cockatiels, budgerigars, lovebirds and canaries, but any species can get into a chronic cycle of egg laying.

The trigger for this behaviour is the increasing light exposure (natural or otherwise) which the bird perceives as the arrival of spring. This causes an increase in the reproductive hormones naturally produced during the breeding season – triggering egg production. Free access to high energy foods, such as seeds, can also stimulate laying. Birds will lay eggs approximately every 48 hours until a full clutch is reached (the number of eggs in a clutch varies from species to species). If left alone many birds will go broody and sit on the eggs. This should be encouraged temporarily as it keeps them occupied and stops them laying eggs for another month.

IS IT A PROBLEM?

- Continuous laying is a problem as these birds can quickly deplete their calcium reserves, especially if on a deficient diet, eg seed-based diet. This can lead to deficiency causing egg binding, neurological signs or bone fractures. This is an emergency and can be fatal if left untreated.

HOW TO DEAL WITH PERSISTENT LAYERS

- **Reduce day length** - Reducing the day length can make the bird think it is winter and reduce the reproductive drive. This can be achieved by covering the cage for a total night-time of 14 hours. The cage needs to be completely dark and quiet during this time.
- **Modify behaviour** - Modifying any behavioural aspects, such as excessive pair bonding behaviours with toys or owners can also help. Birds will often perceive an owner to be a mate, so reducing any cuddling behaviours, avoiding feeding warm foods (which mimics the birds feeding each other) and trying to increase 'flock behaviours' with owners can all be helpful.
- **Disrupt the routine** – Moving the cage to a new location or taking out the nesting materials can disrupt the laying cycle and discourage further egg production.
- **Provide enrichment** – Redirecting reproductive behaviours to other natural behaviours such as foraging, can help reduce persistent laying. Providing toys, foraging opportunities and training can all be helpful (see our separate handout on enrichment). It is important to replace behaviours you remove (eg nest building) with an alternative (eg foraging) to reduce stress.

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- ***Leave eggs in the cage while the bird is nesting*** – Removing eggs can stimulate the bird to continue to lay, as they don't yet have a full clutch, so leaving them in place to allow her to brood them or replacing them with dummy eggs can help interrupt laying. Once the bird loses interest the eggs can be removed.

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- **Medical and surgical Interventions** - Medical or surgical therapy can be used to reduce egg laying in combination with these other interventions. Medical therapy consists of drugs designed to reduce the hormone output from the bird's ovary. This has traditionally been either as by injection (lasts 2-3 weeks) or an implant (can last for several months). Surgical therapy may be recommended to remove the oviduct and prevent egg laying, however there are risks and possible complications associated with this, so it is only considered after all other options have failed.

IMPROVING CALCIUM LEVELS AND GENERAL HEALTH

- **Improve the diet** - Seed is deficient in vitamins and minerals such as calcium, vitamin D and vitamin A. Birds should be gradually changed over to a complete pelleted diet, such as Harrisons or Nutriberries. This should comprise approximately 60-80% of the diet, with the remainder made up of fresh vegetables and fruit (type depending on species) and a small number of high-quality nuts and seeds as treats/training rewards. A calcium supplement such as cuttlefish bone should always be available. Dietary change may be recommended after the bird has finished laying its current clutch and a dietary supplement may be recommended during this time.
- **Provide a UV-b light** - Birds require UV light for multiple reasons one of the most important of which is to regulate their calcium and vitamin D levels. This must be provided with a special bird UV lamp because glass windows do not allow the UV light from the sun into the house. These can be bought online or in specialist pet stores and veterinary clinics. A good review of bird lighting can be found on the Arcadia website www.arcadia-bird.com/uv-lighting/. A bird lamp should be fitted above the cage to reflect light downwards as a bright light hitting the side of the bird can cause eye irritation.

If you have any concerns about your pet bird, please contact us to arrange a consultation with one of our exotics vets. We also offer consultations with our veterinary nurses, for advice on behaviour and husbandry.