Weighing your Budgie

Budgies are notorious for suddenly falling severely ill and/or passing away with seemingly no warning. One good indicator of illness is their droppings but sometimes that fails. Another extremely good way to monitor your budgie's health is monitoring its weight. Recently, two of my budgies contracted a bacterial infection, one of them severe. I would not have known anything was up if I didn't weigh them regularly and keep track of their loss. Everything else about them seemed perfectly normal. Their droppings were fine, activity was fine, they were eating like little pigs. But after seeing a significant weight loss, it was off to the vet where they were diagnosed and then put on antibioitcs.

What scale to use?

Regular digital kitchen scales can work fine with weighing budgies but you do have to be careful on what type to get. Obviously, the surface needs to be large enough for a budgie (or a bowl that the budgie can fit into) to stand on. Just as importantly, the scale should read in *at least* one gram increments. Many scales weigh in two gram increments and this can prolong the amount of time it takes to notice that something is wrong. In an animal as small as a budgie, every single gram counts.

There are also special bird scales that you can buy which often have a T perch attached. Your budgie can step up onto this perch so that it doesn't have to stay still on a flat surface. Some budgies will stay still long enough, many won't. It just depends on the bird. Some of these scales also come with a bowl type attachment and a cover so that you can put the budgie inside, cover it, and get its weight without it flying away. The same thing can be achieved by using the tare function on your kitchen scale. You simply place the bowl (and its lid if you're going to be using one) on the scale, use the tare button, and it reads as zero, even with the bowl on top. Any extra weight added (your budgie, in this case) is the weight it reads.

If you're using a bowl on a set of regular kitchen scales, make sure that what you cover it with is breathable. You can use a plastic lid with holes cut into it. A dark one may help the budgie settle down so that he/she doesn't move as much and so that you can get an accurate weight. You can also hold the lid just above the bowl so that its weight isn't added to the scale. (Remeber that when using the tare function, you include the lid you'll be using as well). Surprisingly enough, I only have one budgie (Phizzy) who I have to use a bowl (or small box with holes poked into) with.

When do you worry?

In my opinion, it's best to weigh your budgies weekly and at the same time each weighing. If you notice a one gram loss in a particular budgie, weigh it again the next day to see if it gains the gram back or loses more. Inexplicable weight loss of 2-3 grams should constitute a trip to your avian vet especially if it appears to be steady. I've had three birds who lost weight due to illness and they literally lost about a gram a day. This is a very dramatic loss for a bird.

Another thing to keep in mind is that when dealing with a baby budgie, weight gain should be observed. At around 8 weeks old, my last baby budgies weighed 28 grams. The healthy boy slowly but steadily gained weight while my baby with a malignant tumor stayed the same. There was no weight loss, but he was also not gaining and for an 8 week old baby, that was odd.

What might be causing the weight loss?

Remember that even a budgie who seems healthy in all other aspects could very likely be sick if you're noticing a steady loss of weight (or lack of weight gain in a baby). There is a phrase called "Sick Bird Syndrome" in the companion parrot world that basically means MANY illnesses have the same or similar symptoms. This is why, when budgie owners come here asking health-related questions, the most common answer is "go to an avian vet." Even if we were avian vets (and we're not) there would be absolutely no way for us to positively diagnose your budgie based on symptoms alone. So many conditions involve the same exact symptoms that it's a complete guessing game. And while we guess, the budgie's condition deteriorates. The best course of action is, of course, to get the bird to the vet to have the problem properly diagnosed.

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This brings up another good point. If your vet does nothing more than look the budgie over, he/she has NOT properly diagnosed the bird. At the very least, you should expect your avian vet to run fecal tests to try and get to the problem. If that fails, they may suggest having a blood panel done.

I've only had three birds lose weight as a sign of illness thus far (two budgies and my eclectus) and in their cases, they were diagnosed with bacterial infections. This is very common in birds and a major reason to always quarantine new birds. It's so easily picked up. Bacteria is all around us and even stress can make your budgie more prone to developing a bacterial infection. These types of infections are combatted with antibiotics but again, this is not the only thing that causes weight loss and treating with antibiotics without knowing for certain that there is a bacterial infection will cause more harm than good if that isn't the real problem.

How much should an adult budgie weigh?

This has been the subject of recent posts so I'm not going to go into detail as it's obvious that there is a certain level of disagreement among us. This is partly because a budgie's ideal weight also depends on the individual budgie. Just like humans, birds have different builds which affect how much they weigh. Some are naturally on the smaller side while others are "big boned." Generally, a standard/pet/american budgie should weigh between 30-40 grams. 40 may be overweight for one budgie but ok for another. 30 for many adult pet budgies is significantly underweight. Most of the budgies I own (and have owned) stay very close to 35 grams and were/are very fit birds. The exception is Pixel, who for a while, topped out at 42 grams. This was overweight for her and she eventually got back down to 36 (with more exercise). All of these budgies are the pet/standard type.

English/show budgies are larger and weigh more. 50-60 grams is normal for them, though there are larger birds and smaller ones, as mentioned before.

When in doubt, feel their keel (breast) bone. It should be easily felt yet not feel as if it's sticking out. If there is a layer of fat on the keel bone, the budgie is overweight.

What's wrong with a pleasantly plump budgie?

I'll be the first to admit that a chubby budgie is often a pretty cute sight. At the same time, it saddens me because this is one of the biggest problems our little birds face. Obesity can cause a bird to have trouble flying and lead to fatty tumors. The extra weight puts extra strain on their internal organs and all this can lead to a lessened quality of life as well as a shortened life span.

How do you prevent your budgie from getting too fat? (Or slim down a fatty bird?)

The answer to this is simple: Proper diet and exercise! All seed diets are often high in fat. A seed mix should contain minimal amounts of fattier seeds such as sunflower and safflower. Your budgie should be getting a wide variety of dark leafy greens as well as bright orange and yellow veggies.

The best form of exercise for your budgie is flight. I've found that putting a playgym directly across the room from my budgie cages entices them to make flights back and forth. You can also gently "chase" your bird provided that it's strongly bonded to you and doesn't get scared by this game. Alternatively, you can step it up on your finger, carry it across the room, and let it fly back to the cage at its own will.

For clipped budgie, flapping and climbing are great exercises. Keeping food and water near the lower portion of the cage encourages the budgie to make frequent trips from top to bottom and back up. Short "flights" can be made by properly clipped budgies and these should be encouraged as well. Step your bird up and quickly (but gently!) push your finger in the air toward a safe landing place. The cage is the place where he/she will most likely fly to so do that at a distance that will make it easy for them to make a steady landing. You can repeat this a few times unless your bird hates it. Many birds actually LOVE this game and come running back for more!

There are many other ways to exercise your budgie but the biggest concerns are making it safe and

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making it enjoyable. What works for one may not work for another so get creative. Make sure there are plenty of interesting toys in your cages and aviaries and rotate these weekly to keep your budgies from becoming bored little perch potatoes.

Here are pictures thanks to Aly aka Feathers (a board member) to give you an idea of how to weigh your budgie.

above picture - 4 week old chick

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above picture - 10 day old chick

Unique solution ID: #1100
Author: Terri
Last update: 29-Feb-2008 09:58

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