Budgerigar Health And Related

Feather Cysts

A **feather cyst** on a bird represents the equivalent of an ingrown hair on a human. Feather cysts are larger in size, of course, since feathers are larger than hairs. The cysts are due to malformation of a developing feather under the skin. They appear as oval or elongated swellings involving a single or several feather follicles. Although they may occur anywhere, they most commonly are found involving the primary feathers of the wings.

A feather cyst occurs when a growing feather is unable to protrude through the skin and curls within the follicle. As the feather continues to grow, the mass enlarges and a cheesy material composed of keratin accumulates.

They can be small yellow masses under the skin or large keratinised masses on the skin. All contain feather material and can be expressed or excised. More appear at subsequent moults, and these cysts are particularly common in those with coarse (buff) feathering. There is a genetic predisposition to their development....or in other words they are hereditary.

Almost all the feather cysts occurred on the outer parts of the wing or the tail, although some were seen on the necks of birds. The cysts were of three types, the first and most common for 70% of the cases, was roughly spherical, up to 1.25cm (just over half an inch) in diameter. Cysts of this type were either very hard or slightly soft, depending on the thickness of the fibrous capsule. This capsule surrounded a core of yellow cheesy material, and the distorted remains of one or more feathers.

The **second type** was very similar to the first, but the surrounding skin was inflamed and thickened. As most of the lesions had not been noticed by the fanciers it was not possible to establish whether the damage to the skin came before or after the development of the cyst.

The **third type** was only seen on wings and accounted for fewer than 10% of cases seen. These were multiple and long and narrow in shape, lying side by side with one cyst corresponding to the follicle of one primary feather. They contained cheesy material as in the other cysts but in a proportion, a very short malformed feather was protruding from the tip of the cyst.

Some theories suggest the following causes for this condition: malnutrition due to improper or incomplete diet, genetic disposition, infection, or result of an injury or trauma involving the feather follicle.

There was a very strong correlation between the first two types of cysts and marked buffness. Birds with this type of inherited plumage have a strong tendency to develop cysts. It is commonly discussed amongst show breeders that certain family lines of birds carry the uinheritance for feather cysts and these birds are to be culled or avoided in breeding strategy.

There is no success with treatment for this condition other than surgical removal and it must be borne in mind that the birds will never regrow the feathers. It is probably not advisable to breed from birds with feather cysts or from their close relatives.
Feather lumps can be quite painful for the bird, depending on their placement. If they are situated where they can cause pressure on a nerve or an internal organ, they can cause long-term damage, on occasion even even death.

Treatment consists of surgically removing the involved feather follicles. If the follicle is just incised and the feather with its accumulation of keratin is removed, it will usually recur. Initial resection is not a major procedure, but recurrence is common unless the extensive dissection of the feather follicle is accomplished. In birds with multiple affected feathers, this is not practical.
Previously published reports suggest that feather cyst removal is unrewarding because cysts frequently recur after lancing, curettage, or removal of feather follicle. .

Some experienced breeders recommend the following amino acids for a successful, lump-free moult: methionine, lysine, threonine, and tryptophan, which are found in various foods). They also suggest that lecithin (an unsaturated fatty acid) also aids in allowing feather growth to occur smoothly. Adequate B vitamins, mineral content (especially zinc), folic acid and Biotin have also been cited as essential elements required for a trouble-free moult.

Example of a feather cyst on the wing of a budgerigar (this feather cyst has been repeatedly expressed and just keeps returning).

Unique solution ID: #1231
Author: Kaz
Last update: 08-Dec-2008 09:51