

Cheese (Dairy) Ingestion can Equal Death in Psittacine Birds

Cheese and Dairy products in general should **NOT** be given to our pet birds! Contrary to years of misinformation regarding the supposed “safety” of dairy ingestion, the avian digestive tract is incapable of digesting the lactose contained in most of these products thereby causing severe inflammatory reactions, obstructions, or even death.

From a common sense approach, avian species are NOT nursing animals. They develop from an egg with the yolk as their sole food source until they hatch. After a chick hatches the hen “FEEDS” the chick food that she first ingested from her daily foraging and then regurgitates the contents from her crop into the crop of the chick. There is no mammary tissue involved unlike in mammals. Because of this, birds never evolved to produce lactase, the enzyme necessary to digest lactose. Essentially, all birds are highly “lactose-intolerant” species.

You may ask: **But why does my bird like cheese?**

Well, I will ask you in return; Does everything that taste good to us safe? Of course not!

Radiator antifreeze has a great sweet taste, but kills many dogs and cats each year from kidney failure. Chocolate also causes many animals to visit an emergency clinic after Valentine’s Day. There are many products that “taste” good, but are not safe for our pets, so we must act as the “safety” guardian for them.

You may ask: **How come my bird ate cheese and did not become sick?**

Well, again, it depends on how much they eat, the type of cheese (and lactose concentration), the frequency (once a month or every day), and what other components are contained in the cheese like gum or other chemical derivatives that can worsen the effects. It is sort of like alcohol ingestion in people; a little will cause no visible effect, a little more can make you drunk, and a lot more can actually cause alcohol poisoning and death.

You may ask: **How does cheese and lactose affect my bird?**

Since the bird cannot breakdown the lactose, the bird’s gastrointestinal tract initiates an allergic/inflammatory reaction to the product. This can lead to mild inflammation with no clinical signs, mild symptoms like diarrhea in moderate cases (laxative effect) or total blockage/enterotoxemia in severe cases. Mild symptoms are often missed or incorrectly diagnosed as just “Oh that is normal for this particular bird”. As the frequency or quantity of ingestion increases, the inflammatory process can lead to secondary bacterial/fungal infections, decreased gastrointestinal motility, or complete functional/foreign body obstruction, toxemia and death.

You may ask: **Can you tell me some types of cheese that have caused the most serious problems?**

Mozzarella cheese is by far the worse offending cheese and the number one recovered surgically from birds at The BIRD Clinic Veterinary Corporation. It is found in all pizzas, lasagna, and under other names such as “String-cheese”. Because of the high gum content in mozzarella, this cheese has a very high risk of becoming obstructed in the intestinal tract and death within 48-72 hours.

Jack cheese and other soft “white” cheeses often cause proventriculitis (gastritis) with secondary bacterial/fungal infections. The prognosis is solely dependent on whether surgical intervention (clean-out) and medical therapy can control the inflammatory process and secondary toxemia that ensues.

In conclusion.....

Please Do Not Feed Dairy Products to Your Pet Bird!