

Cheese Ingestion can Equal Death in Psittacine Birds

Cheese and Dairy products 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 allergic reactions, obstructive disease, 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, as in mammals. Because of this, birds never evolved to produce lactase, the enzyme necessary to help digest lactose. Essentially, 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 good for us, so we must act as the “safety” guardian for our pets.

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

Well, again, it depends on how much they ate, 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 and 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 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 or 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.

September 9, 2005 NEWS UPDATE: An Umbrella Cockatoo was referred to The BIRD Clinic for a mass in the crop region for approximately 7 days. The mass on presentation was firm, movable and confirmed that it was located inside the crop. Surgical removal was recommended and performed with no complications. The mass removed was $\frac{3}{4}$ " long x $\frac{1}{2}$ " x $\frac{1}{2}$ " and encapsulated by an inflammatory capsule. On cut section it was identified as mozzarella cheese. On further questioning the owner it was discovered the bird was fed "String Cheese", but had been told it was ok by a veterinarian. This bird was very lucky the piece was not smaller and got lodged in the proventriculus (stomach) or ventriculus (gizzard) as that would have been a potential life threatening condition and a much more complicated surgical procedure.

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.

Cottage Cheese/Feta Cheese has also caused this syndrome. One case presented to The BIRD Clinic with a history of diarrhea for several months and repeated treatments for bacterial enteritis. The bird eventually became lethargic, anorectic, and unresponsive to antibiotics. Radiographs demonstrated an enlarged proventriculus with an obstructive process extending from the mid-proventriculus to the duodenum and a transit time of over 20 hours (normal 3-6 hours). In spite of surgical removal and intensive medical therapy this patient succumbed to toxemia.

In conclusion.....

Please Do Not Feed Dairy Products to Your Pet Bird !