

This week we are going to discuss a problem concerning Petunia, the twelve-year-old companion of Mark from Modesto. Petunia has lived with Mark since she was a little baby and has been in good health for her entire life. Recently she has begun to drink a lot of water and seems to have developed diarrhea. Mark frequently has to clean the feathered area around her vent as fecal material is commonly stuck there. Oh, I neglected to mention that Petunia is a cockatiel. This problem has been apparent to Mark for the last month or so and appears to be getting worse.

The first thing I would like to determine is indeed if the material clinging to Petunia's vent area is indeed feces. People will commonly mistake the white material that birds produce from their vent as feces. This material is actually called uric acid and it comes from the urinary tract. Unlike mammals, birds produce uric acid as part of their urinary waste, which is a solid white material that does not dissolve in water. It is surrounded by water in order to allow the material to pass out of the body. I'm sure we've all seen this white material deposited so nicely on our automobiles usually right after they've been washed. The fecal material that often times accompanies the uric acid is, in the case of cockatiels, a light brown to various shades of green in color. If Petunia is drinking excessively, I suspect she is producing excess water from her urinary tract which can be quite messy and appear like diarrhea.

Diarrhea in birds is indicated by stool that is not formed and is excessive. From Mark's description, I am not able to determine whether Petunia has diarrhea or excessive urination. I am betting on urination.

Petunia needs a trip to her avian veterinarian for an examination and some work-up. Mark is lucky because Petunia has shown her symptoms, giving him the opportunity to address her problem before it is too late. Birds often times hide their problems from their caretakers until whatever disease may be occurring progresses to a point of extreme severity. This is because of their wild heritage. If a bird shows any weakness in the wild, the first predator that comes along will wipe them out, hence their tremendous drive to mask their symptoms. Unfortunately, in captivity, they still maintain this behavior which can make it difficult for caretakers to spot problems.

Examination will determine whether Petunia indeed has diarrhea or excess urination and from this determination, lab work can be performed. In the case of excess urination and excess thirst, I would consider the possibility of a kidney problem. Cockatiels also can develop diabetes which leads to excess thirst and excess urination. A simple blood panel and urinalysis will usually be enough to determine the presence of either of these diseases. Of course there are other possible causes.

If Petunia's condition is truly diarrhea, our diagnostic steps will center around the digestive tract and also should include blood work as well as a check for internal parasites and bacteria in the digestive tract. Diet should also be reviewed. As some of you loyal readers will attest, we have discussed diets in birds in this column in the past stressing how extremely important it is to the health of these wonderful creatures. Hopefully, Petunia will get some veterinary help allowing a diagnosis and resolution of her problem.