

We have discussed here in the past how very important it is to catch changes in our companions' behaviors and habits as early as possible, in order that whatever might be wrong can be addressed before a disease might become untreatable. This is true in all the species we consider as companions, but some species are much more difficult to spot problems in versus others. Birds are among the most difficult.

Owing to the fact that birds are essentially wild creatures that have been adapted to captivity, they still possess many wild traits. One of these is their tendency to hide symptoms in the face of illness. This is an adaptation to living in a group. When a bird shows symptoms of disease, they are targets for predators and attract attention to their flock. The flock will reject them in order to avoid this unwanted attention. Unfortunately, this same behavior continues in captivity and oftentimes makes it very difficult for caretakers to spot problems in their birds.

Kiwi is an eleven-year-old sulfur crested cockatoo living with Mandy in her apartment. She is fed a diet of "parrot mix", as well as fruit and vegetables of varying types. She spends lots of time out of her cage and is very tightly bonded to Mandy.

Over the past two months or so Mandy reports that Kiwi has been drinking more water and her droppings have changed color from a deep emerald green to a more bright "electric" green as described by Mandy. She has not shown any other changes that Mandy has noticed, other than the papers in the bottom of her cage seem to wetter than had been the case in the past.

There is without question a problem with Kiwi. The change in the color of the droppings is a definite clue. The color at present, as described by Mandy, indicates a possible liver problem. When the liver in some types of birds is not functioning properly, the color of the droppings changes because of the chemical change in the makeup of the droppings as processed by the liver.

The increased thirst, and what sounds to me like increased liquid production from the urinary tract as a result, can also be caused by liver disease, although there are many diseases that can lead to these symptoms.

The product of the urinary tract in birds is different than it is in mammals. Mammals produce urea, which is a liquid, while birds produce solid material, yellowish to white in color, called uric acid. It is surrounded by liquid, mostly water, and then excreted. When birds drink excessively, they will excrete excessive amounts of water from their urinary tract, as is the case with Kiwi.

Kiwi needs some diagnostics testing to elicit what is causing the changes noted by Mandy. These tests should include a blood and urine analysis among others. With these tests, we can determine what might be causing the changes shown by Kiwi and then hopefully be able to treat the problem. Again, the earlier the cause is discovered, the more likely we are to have the ability to help Kiwi. Right now, we do not know definitively how long Kiwi has been dealing with his disease.

If indeed Kiwi is dealing with liver disease, I would consider the diet as a possible cause. Seed based diets in our psittacine patients are a long term recipe for disaster. This is due to several factors. First of all, seed based diets allow birds to pick and choose what seeds they like to eat and leave those they don't. This makes this type of diet unbalanced

and frankly, even if the bird ate all the seeds in the mix, the diet would still be unbalanced. Another problem with seed based diets results from the fact that seeds are very high in fat. This, in the simplest of terms, makes the bird high in fat. This fat will often times deposit in the liver and overtime lead to death from liver failure. Kiwi is a candidate for this scenario.

If indeed Kiwi's blood work shows a liver problem, I would recommend an endoscopic exam and biopsy of her liver. This will help us determine the type of liver problem and oftentimes to what degree it has progressed. With this information, we can formulate a treatment plan to hopefully turn her around. The cornerstone for a return to good health will involve a dietary change.

Kiwi and all psittacine birds should eat a very varied diet, which can be inconvenient for some caretakers. This is where a pelleted base diet can provide complete nutrition.