

# Supportive Care for Sick or Injured Captive Birds

A bird that is ill or injured but not bleeding should receive supportive care immediately. Birds have high metabolic rates, and their body temperature is much higher than our own, averaging 103-106° F.

Supportive care includes a heated (at least 85 degree F) enclosure in a quiet, restful environment, hydration and nutrition. Placing an ill or injured bird in a heated hospital enclosure or carrier, brooder, or incubator can literally save their life. The less energy a bird has to expend to maintain their body temperature, the more likely they are to recover.

**House injured or ill birds away from other birds in the shelters. Provide heat and food in a quiet area and minimize handling until a veterinarian can see them.**

- **Place bird into a carrier or hospital cage:** A hospital cage can be made from a smaller cage or a small glass fish tank. If the bird remains in his/her own cage, remove the perches and pad the bottom with a towel.
  - **Provide supplemental heat:** Heating lamps and/or heating pads do the job well and should be set up to cover half the hospital cage and allow the bird to move away from the heat source if needed. Maintain a temperature of 85-90° F. Partially cover the cage with a blanket or towel to give the bird privacy and help keep warmth inside the cage.
  - **Provide fluids:** Birds not eating or drinking need to be hydrated immediately after a period of warming. Use a spoon or small syringe to try to get the bird to drink on his/her own (Pedialyte or 100% fruit juice such as apple, pear, or grape). Placing the syringe near the bird's beak, gently squeeze a few drops of fluid into their mouth at a time. Do not force-feed the fluids, as the stress of handling may worsen the situation.
  - **Provide food:** Birds have a high metabolic rate. Without food energy, a healthy bird can starve to death in 48-72 hours, and more rapidly when ill. Adequate nutrition to maximize their ability to fight and recover from illness is essential. The priority is enticing the bird to eat on his/her own; do not force feed the bird. Offer a variety of foods, especially the bird's favorite food and diet they're accustomed to eating (now is not the time to introduce unfamiliar foods), and insure that water and food bowls are easily accessible.
- Foods to offer:** seed, millet, pellets, some fresh fruit, or easily digestible human foods such as mashed ripe bananas, applesauce, strained or soft vegetables such as peas or vegetables, infant rice cereal or baby food, oatmeal, or ground up pellets mixed with fruit juice.
- **Hand Feeding:** When a bird will not eat on his/her own, syringe or gavage (tube) feeding can be useful in providing nutritional support, but only a veterinarian or someone experienced with the procedure should perform it. A bird can easily aspirate (inhale food) and develop pneumonia. Improper syringe feeding could also result in crop puncture, or even death.
  - **Humidity:** If a bird is experiencing respiratory distress such as wheezing, discharge from nostrils, labored breathing, gasping or clicking, humidity can help to ease breathing and keep the bird's air passages clear and moist. Placing the bird in a steamy bathroom may help.



**Example of a Hospital Enclosure**

- Heating pad underneath or heating lamp above to cover half the enclosure
- Towel and shallow food & water dishes inside
- Portable unit



**Sick bird**

Sick birds require supplemental heat to maintain their body temperature, along with fluids, nutrition, and quiet.

## A Word About Fluffed Feathers

Fluffed feathers are generally seen as a sign that a bird is not feeling well. However, there are instances where a bird may be fluffed, but not necessarily sick. The bird may be nervous or stressed, or they are cold and trying to preserve some body heat. Birds also fluff up their feathers when they are relaxed and/or taking a nap. But, if a bird is fluffed and lying prone on the floor, laboring to breathe, unable to perch, and refusing to eat or drink, they should be seen by a veterinarian immediately.

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