

Dear Dr. Wise,

Question: We keep finding feathers in the bottom of our parakeet's cage and wonder if this is normal. Is this the same thing as molting? Billie is two years old. He's a beautiful parakeet and seems healthy except for the feather loss.

Answer: What is happening to Billie sounds perfectly normal. His feathers need replacing periodically because they wear out. They are like our own human hair, which falls out and then regrows from the follicles in the skin.

You are right; the process is called molting. You are noticing a few feathers at a time because Billie molts continuously. Most common indoor birds such as parakeets, parrots and budgies lose a few feathers at a time throughout the year – just as their cousins in the tropics do.

If Billie's feathers were not growing back or if he were preening (cleaning) himself excessively, I would suspect a problem. Feather picking is the term used when preening is taken a step too far and the bird begins to destroy his own feathers and skin.

I think you can expect Billie to continue losing a few feathers at a time – it is a good sign. Incidentally, most outdoor birds molt seasonally and replace all their feathers at one time.

Birds that are molting need a high protein diet. So be sure he is on a well balanced diet containing food rich in protein, fat and carbohydrate as well as vitamins and minerals. A diet of just seeds is not adequate and would not provide enough nutrition to keep Billie healthy for very long.

If you are afraid Billie is not receiving adequate nutrition because he is on an all-seed diet, use this rule of thumb: feed him 50 percent seed and 50 percent human food from all the food groups. Birds love fruit and vegetables. They also love meat; just make sure that it is cut up.

In the wild, birds bathe. They do not have the opportunity to do that in the civilized world. As an alternative, regularly mist Billie with a plant mister to promote normal preening and molting.

It's easy to take molting for granted since Billie's doing so well. But proper molting – as well as good nutrition and your attention – are essential to a bird's well being.

If you have a question about your pet, write to Dr. Wise, Indiana Veterinary Medical Association, 201 S. Capitol Ave. Ste. 405, Indianapolis, IN, 46225 or www.invma.org