

Please Don't Poison Pretty Bird

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor
March 2019



ate last year someone posted a sad warning on a Facebook bird-owner group page.

“The potential of someone else having their pet bird die is more important than my embarrassment, which is why I’m choosing to post this,” she wrote. “Tonight I accidentally killed my pet diamond doves by using the self-cleaning feature on my oven.” She added a graphic photograph of her bird family’s lifeless bodies lined up in a row.

This pet owner went on to explain that she has had 43 years of experience owning birds, as well as experience safely cleaning ovens around them. She took many precautions, such as opening the kitchen window, turning on exhaust and ceiling fans, and having her bird cages in a separate room with the door closed.

She followed the oven manufacturer’s user guide instructions to operate the self-cleaning cycle with birds in the home, but it was not enough to prevent the deaths of four of her doves in mere minutes. She pleaded with her Facebook friends to share her post and to warn others that if they use the self-cleaning oven feature, “move your birds entirely out of your home!”

Birds have particularly sensitive respiratory systems that are very efficient at exchanging gases, making for more oxygen being transferred into the blood with each breath. Unfortunately, that also makes their system deliver poisonous gases more quickly throughout their small bodies. The self-cleaning feature on ovens is only one source of many types of fumes that are toxic to birds.

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Secondhand tobacco smoke, perfumes, hairspray, nail polish remover, air fresheners, glues, paints, permanent markers, candles, furniture polish, space heaters, pesticides, new carpets, and cleaning products like bleach and ammonia are common household products that emit fumes that can be deadly to birds.

Carbon monoxide from log fires, central heating units, and car exhaust are just as toxic. Ionizers and air purifiers that emit ozone should not be used around birds.

In the 1980s, pet owners became aware of the dangers of cooking with Teflon-coated and other non-stick cookware and stovetop burners. Polytetrafluoroethylene toxicosis (PTFE poisoning, more commonly called Teflon toxicity) causes breathing difficulty, weakness, disoriented behavior, tremors, and seizures in affected birds. Death comes quickly with severe exposure to the fumes.

The mere presence of Teflon-coated pans is safe, but when heated to very high temperatures, they emit fumes. Inhaled PTFE particles in fumes cause fluid and blood to seep into a bird's respiratory passages. The larger the bird, the better its chances of surviving heated Teflon exposure. Emergency veterinary care is essential for recovery. Other household products with nonstick chemicals are irons, ironing board covers, and stain-guard treated upholstery.

One way to help ensure a cleaner air environment for indoor birds is to use an ozone-free and ion-free air purifier. The Airfree Air Purifier is marketed as a bird-safe product that sterilizes the air and destroys 99.9 percent of airborne microorganisms without emitting toxins.

According to the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center, 25 percent of reported bird poisoning is caused by cleaning products; 25 percent by pesticides; 12 percent by plants; 11 percent by medicines; and 27 percent by other things, including nonstick cookware, foods, and heavy metals.

Another poison control center with 24/7 accessibility is the Pet Poison Helpline. It provides pet owners and veterinarians with poison treatment advice. Its list of the most common toxins in companion birds are lead, zinc, avocado, polytetrafluoroethylene, and inhaled toxic fumes.

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Lead poisoning in birds has decreased in recent years due to precautions taken to prevent lead poisoning in humans. Lead-based paint, imported toys, and bells with clappers are common sources of lead. Symptoms of lead poisoning in birds include depression, weakness, weight loss, vomiting, diarrhea, and seizures.

Zinc is now the most common metal poisoning in birds. Galvanized wire cages, mesh, nails, and toys can contain 98 percent zinc. Symptoms of zinc poisoning are similar to lead poisoning.

Avocados are very poisonous to birds and can cause cardiovascular damage and sudden death. Symptoms are difficulty breathing, feather pulling, weakness, food refusal, and fluid around the heart. The avocado toxin is called persin, similar to a fatty acid.

Other foods are poisonous to birds as well. Chocolate and caffeine can cause seizures and irregular heartbeat. Onion and garlic should be avoided as they cause rupture of red blood cells and anemia. Salt is extremely poisonous to companion birds, causing tremors, lethargy, and death. Tomatoes can cause ulcers; mushrooms are known to cause digestive problems and liver failure. Milk products cannot be digested by birds.

Contact the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center at 888-426-4435. They charge a \$65 consultation fee that is applied to your credit card. The Pet Poison Helpline is 855-764-7661. For an initial and follow-up consultation with you and/or your veterinarian, they charge \$59, paid to them through PayPal.

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