

# The Toxic 10 – Tolerable for You, but Toxic to These Pets

They can induce problems from respiratory distress to heart failure and death. Some represent healthy deliciousness to you, but can kill these animals. Know them, name them, and keep them under lock and key.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A number of substances in your home and environment, such as chemical sweeteners and aerosols, may be tolerable to humans but toxic to pet birds
- Foods such as salt, fat, guacamole and chocolate contain substances that your feathered buddy may like to eat but could cause respiratory failure, anemia, liver damage and even death
- Avoiding food, toys and chemical compounds that may bring serious harm to your bird's well-being involves being well informed, using common sense and paying attention to your bird's surroundings
- Birds have a higher metabolism than most mammals and could easily be harmed by even small amounts of xylitol, a chemical sweetener
- Especially when your bird is out of her cage, keep a sharp eye out, and also keep your eye on other animals who might think your feathered friend is an interesting toy

**Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published April 20, 2017.**

Pet birds can be a little like toddlers in one way, necessitating constant vigilance: They can find small objects and substances — which may be toxic — and either pick them up with their beaks, play with them or give them a taste test for palatability.

While parents watch their human toddlers like a hawk to make sure they don't put pebbles, lint or harmful chemicals from under the sink into their mouths, it often surprises bird owners that their avian charges might do the same thing. Some substances you already know are dangerous, but others may surprise you.

One thing to note is that what might be poison to one bird species may not be to another. Vetstreet notes:

*"Despite some variability in species susceptibility to certain toxins, as well as a lack of scientific studies proving the toxicity of certain substances in birds that are definitely toxic to mammals, there are some items to which birds should never have access."<sup>1</sup>*

The following list may be the "toxic top 10" among substances you should keep away from your pet bird.

# 10 Everyday Items That Are Toxic to Birds

## 1. **Heavy metals such as lead, zinc, and copper**



Metals are contained in more places than you might imagine — loose wires, linoleum, paint, twist ties, soldering and zippers, to name a few, because birds love to nosh on them. Items containing lead, such as bells and other bird toys, may need to be removed.

Birds are unique in that they can begin pecking away at painted surfaces such as painted windowsills or even the lead that holds stained glass together.

If enough toxic substances such as these are ingested, pet birds can suffer from vomiting and even nerve damage, neuralgic damage that causes seizures or clenched toes.

If these signs occur or you think your feathered friend may have ingested lead or some other metal, it's important to have him tested and get treatment as soon as possible so permanent damage doesn't occur. Otherwise, it could be life-threatening.

## 2. **Avocado**



Persin, a compound found in avocado plants, particularly the leaves, has been reported to cause several bird species to experience respiratory distress, heart failure and even death. While avocado appears to be tolerated by many birds, some birds appear to have a sensitivity that should be noted.

Some birds, including Lories, don't seem to be affected, but it's easier to withhold access to the plant from your pet birds, as well as your leftover guacamole, rather than taking a chance.

### 3. **Apple seeds and fruit pits**



Most fruit is safe for birds to eat, but certain fruit seeds, such as apples and pears, or pits, like those from cherries, plums, nectarines, peaches and apricots, contain cyanide, a cardio-toxic substance that's poison to birds' systems.

Not to worry, though — simply remove the seeds or pits first and let your bird enjoy eating the fruit. Additionally, note that seeds from grapes, **tomatoes**, pumpkins, squash, mangoes, citrus fruits and berries are perfectly safe for birds to eat.

### 4. **Nonstick cookware**



Certain types of nonstick cookware isn't good for humans, and it isn't good for pets, either, including birds, and it isn't just ingesting the substance itself that's a problem. As Vetstreet explains:

*"When [certain] nonstick surfaces are heated to very high temperatures, they emit microscopic vapors that when inhaled by birds' exquisitely sensitive respiratory tracts can cause instant death.*

*Numerous birds within a single household have been reported to die simultaneously when [certain non-stick] pans are burned near them. In general, all nonstick cookware and other nonstick-coated appliances, including some stoves (in particular, the self-cleaning oven feature) and toasters, should be avoided in homes with birds."*<sup>2</sup>

If birds are accidentally exposed to toxic fumes from nonstick cookware, they should be placed in a well-ventilated area as quickly as possible. However, most birds die before some bird owners even realize what's

happening. If you suspect your pet bird has been exposed, bring her to an animal hospital immediately for oxygen therapy and other treatment.

## 5. **Caffeine**



For people, caffeine in coffee, tea and certain soft drinks can be a prerequisite, but it can be harmful to your bird, even in small amounts. Their systems are quite tiny, after all. Caffeine speeds up the heart rate in humans, so you can imagine what it might do to a parakeet.

Some of the complications birds may experience from caffeine include hyperactivity, which wouldn't be funny if it then led to increased heart rate or even cardiac arrest. It's better to stick to plain water in your bird's watering dish, or an occasional sip of pure fruit juice, such as apple or cranberry, with no added sugar.

## 6. **Chocolate**



As you may have surmised, chocolate is another substance containing caffeine that feathered creatures shouldn't have access to. But chocolate also contains theobromine, which can cause similar symptoms to caffeine: an increased heart rate, tremors and, again, potential death.

While dark chocolate is preferable to milk chocolate for humans, it contains an even higher percentage of cacao, and therefore caffeine and theobromine. A much healthier treat might be banana slices or grapes.

## 7. **Salt and fat**



Birds love salt, often found liberally sprinkled on popcorn, chips and crackers. (Remember "Polly Want a Cracker?") But salt can cause damage to a small bird's electrolyte balance, causing thirst that could lead to dehydration, kidney damage and even death.

Fatty foods such as butter, fatty meats and nuts also can leave fat deposits in a bird's arteries, a condition known as atherosclerosis, and bring about heart disease, high cholesterol and triglyceride levels and stroke. Some bird species are especially prone to such disorders; Amazon parrots and Quakers are two examples. Even a few small bites can be harmful to feathered pets, so be aware of what's sitting around and also what not-so-savvy humans may offer your pets to eat.

#### 8. **Xylitol**



Xylitol is an artificial sweetener often found in diet foods and sugarless chewing gum and candy, but it hasn't been studied for safety in birds. The fact is, xylitol causes life-threatening hypoglycemia, or low blood sugar, as well as liver damage in dogs.

Birds, which have a higher metabolism than most mammals, could easily be harmed by even small amounts of this chemical sweetener. If you feel your bird needs any kind of a diet, give her veggies with low starch content. Keep artificially flavored, low-calorie foods out of reach, and as well as anything sugar-free.

#### 9. **Onions and garlic**



Members of the allium family of plants, onions and garlic may represent savory, heart-healthy deliciousness to humans, but compounds such as allicin and sulfur in onions and garlic may be toxic to birds in high quantities and cause changes to their red blood cells if consumed in excess.

#### 10. **Smoke and aerosols**



Smoke from cigarettes, cigars and pipes isn't healthy for humans for a number of reasons, but it can be lethal for birds when they're forced to breathe in the smoke. Again, their systems are delicate and weren't designed to filter carcinogens, which is what smoke contains.

Birds actually inhale and exhale simultaneously with every breath, and they're also extremely sensitive to aerosols from hairspray, oven cleaner or spray paint. Candle fumes can also irritate their lungs as well as their air sacs, the clear membranes under birds' skin throughout their bodies that help them breathe.

Birds aren't designed like humans, so if you have guests in the house who might use such products resulting in accidental exposure, birds should be moved to well-ventilated areas immediately. All room sprays, deodorizers, plug-ins, synthetically fragranced candles and incense should not be used in homes where birds live. According to Vetstreet:

*"Exposed birds who do not start to breathe at a normal rate and with normal effort simply with better ventilation should be brought to a veterinarian as soon as possible for supportive therapy, such as fluids and oxygen. The moral is: If you're going to spray, keep the birds away."<sup>3</sup>*

## Use Common Sense to Keep Vulnerable Birds Safe

Especially when your bird is out of her cage, keep a sharp eye out, and also keep your eye on other animals who might think your feathered friend is an interesting toy! Keep only nontoxic bird food on hand as well as nontoxic toys for her to entertain herself with.

There are any number of things that may be dangerous for your bird's health — plants, for instance, that birds may peck at and munch on — but being aware of your environment and using common sense will ensure that your beloved feathered friends stay safe, healthy and happy.

### Sources and References

<sup>1, 2, 3</sup> [Vetstreet September 16, 2015](#)

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