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Aspergillosis!

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Editor's Note: What follows is a compilation of stories from pet bird guardians whose birds were diagnosed with Aspergillosis (aka "asper"), a severe disease that strikes quickly. We hope these stories will help other bird owners by alerting them to the causes and symptoms of this deadly disease. Readers desiring more background on Aspergillosis may refer to our prior newsletter [article](#).

Sophie's Story



We adopted Sophie, our first conure, a Jenday, from a pet bird breeder when Sophie was about three months old. I confess that neither my husband, nor I, knew a thing about conures, although we'd had plenty of pet budgies before then. I sure wish I'd known about Mickaboo back then!

Sophie was about 14 years old in the year 2000, when we contracted for a major renovation on our newly purchased home. This involved extending the entire back portion of the house about 120 square feet and enlarging the kitchen. We lived in the home during the remodel, except for brief periods when we all had to move out.

I blame the molds and other particulates that were released into the air when the contractor and his crew demolished the back walls of our home! Within two weeks, both my husband and I developed respiratory allergies. For that reason, I was on the lookout for any impact the environment was having on Sophie.

Sure enough, not long after that, she developed obvious signs of respiratory distress and loss of appetite. I rushed her to the Bay Area Bird Hospital where, after thorough examination, Dr. Lynn Dustin diagnosed ASPERGILLOSIS! What a shock. Even bigger was the shock we experienced learning that Sophie's illness required surgery (specifically, application under anesthesia of a suction trachea airsac tube); about 10 days hospitalization; numerous medications, injections and follow-up treatment; and four months of home therapy involving twice-daily nebulization. The total cost of all this treatment was over \$2500.

The details: As part of her diagnosis, they did an Asper panel and CBC, plus a scan of her respiratory system. While in the hospital, Sophie was treated with a number of anti-inflammatories and anti-fungal medications, including Itaconazole and Clotrimazole. This was in addition to the surgery, which called for insertion of a suction trachea air sac tube.

When we finally were able to bring Sophie home from the hospital, we were given a prescription anti-fungal/anti-inflammatory medication and told to administer this to Sophie inside of a nebulizer twice a day. We obtained the nebulizer from Walgreen's (these are not expensive). For a container to put Sophie in during the treatments, we bought a small plastic terrarium from a pet store. We sterilized it thoroughly before use. We did this from the beginning of December through the end of March. There were many follow up vet checks with Dr. Dustin after that, lasting almost through the end of the year.

At the conclusion of the nebulizer treatments, though, it was very obvious that Sophie's condition had improved a lot. Her appetite and other normal behaviors began returning to normal. By year-end, she was definitely her old self again.

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The good news, however, is that Sophie survived! Luckily, she had not been sick for a long time, and she was rushed into treatment before the Aspergillosis became too far advanced.

Sophie graced our lives for another 15 years after that. Ironically, her favorite room was the new kitchen! When she was 29 ½, she died, peacefully, of old age.



Below is an inspirational bit of verse by the poet Irving Thompson, which was sent to me by a dear friend right after Sophie died. I have found it quite helpful and referred to it again and again in the months after she passed away:

We who choose to surround ourselves with lives even more temporary than our own,
Live within a fragile circle, easily and often breached.
Unable to accept its awful gaps, we still would live no other way.
We cherish memory as the only immortality,
Never fully understanding the necessary plan.

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Sherman's Story



Sherman was the first Pionus we adopted from Mickaboo. He owned us for almost four years. Sherman was not the most social bird, but he had a wonderful laugh and a sweet voice. He would talk to us as he patrolled the top of his cage, or wandered around the floor and hung out with us in the living room. I was working with him to come up to me while I sat on the floor and get a treat. He was so close to stepping up on my leg for his treat ... then he got sick.

At first I didn't think he was sick, because he seemed to become his old self as the day went on. Then he didn't bounce back and sat on his cage fluffed up with his beak tucked in.

Maybe he ate something? Or was it just a cold? So into Medical Center for Birds ("MCFB") we went, and from the look on Dr. Olson's face we knew it wasn't good. He said Sherman was underweight and probably had Aspergillosis. The doctor said that Pionus are very susceptible to Aspergillus, and it could have been something in the air or in something he ate.

MCFB would keep Sherman and try and treat him. After two weeks in the hospital, Sherman wasn't improving. X-rays showed a lot of white areas that shouldn't have been there. The white areas were outside his lungs, actually pressing against them and other organs. Dr. Olson said that when he did an ultrasound, he couldn't see through the fungus.

So we discussed surgery and on Friday Dr. Olson took Sherman in to surgery hoping he could see more and then spray the fungus so that it would start to die and Sherman could get it out of his system. Unfortunately the surgery didn't go as planned. Dr. Olson couldn't get around the gunk to see anything. Sherman got through the surgery ok, and we thought we'd be scheduling another surgery on his left side.

We scheduled time to visit Sherman on Saturday because the doctor said Sherman seemed to be feeling ok. Then the call came. Sherman had taken a turn for the worst. He was not moving, and having trouble breathing. Doc said we should get there ASAP as they were doing what they could to keep him comfortable, but he didn't know how long Sherman would last.

We got to MCFB and talked to Dr. Olson, who told us Sherman was suffering and he didn't think there were any life-saving measures that would help. We went back to see Sherman and he was lying flat on the bottom of the cage. He was breathing, but that was all. I had to leave the room, it hurt so bad to see him like that.

Mike made the decision to let him go. Neither of us wanted to see him suffer any more.

We have never lost a bird to such a horrible fungal disease. And I've never been so heart-broken. Sherman was our friend, our companion, our pal. He'd laugh at the most inappropriate times, making us laugh with him.

I will miss my buddy Sherman and there will be an empty spot in my heart without him.