

Bird Safety Corner

Tobacco Products and Matches

Does your parrot smoke? If you do, the answer is yes.
-Elizabeth Opperman, Parrot Examiner, 8/6/11

Oh where do I begin! Tobacco is SO bad for birds (and humans and dogs and cats and...well everyone!). I thought I'd take this opportunity to point out some specifics, though, so those people who do smoke can do their best to keep their feathered friends safe. Please keep in mind that other inhaled substances such as marijuana are equally as bad for birds.

First there's the **smoke** itself. Birds have very sensitive respiratory systems because their system of lung sacs does not filter toxins the way our lungs do. We all know how deadly nonstick coatings are for birds, for this very reason. Birds also breathe much faster than we do, so their exposure to smoke can be greater. There's a reason miners took canaries into the coal mines! If you must smoke, it's best to smoke outside and away from any air intake that could bring the smoke indoors.



Another big problem with smoking is the **nicotine** that gets on the furniture, walls, and every place exposed to the smoke, including companion animals. Even if you smoke outdoors, nicotine gets on your hands. Birds exposed to nicotine, whether directly from smoke or from being handled by someone with nicotine on their hands, develop dingy, dirty, greasy feathers. Preening these feathers causes the bird to ingest nicotine, which is poisonous. Because nicotine cannot be easily removed from feathers, some birds resort to plucking. Nicotine on the feet causes dermatitis. If you have to smoke, be sure to scrub your hands and any exposed skin with soap and water prior to handling your birds.

Make sure you dispose of all **cigarette butts** far away from where a curious beak can get at them. Even a small butt can contain up to 25% of the nicotine in a whole cigarette, and birds that swallow nicotine often die rapidly, within 15-30 minutes. Signs of nicotine poisoning include twitching, excitability, salivating, vomiting, seizures, collapse, and death.



The newest tobacco product danger is **e-cigarettes**, also known as **vaping**. Liquid containing nicotine and an assortment of other chemicals is put in a chamber which is heated, giving off a vapor that is inhaled. Touted as safer than smoking cigarettes, the jury is still out on this. In addition to the direct toxicity of nicotine, vaping



solutions may also contain antifreeze components, formaldehyde, and at least two dozen other toxic chemicals. Vaping around your birds is just as dangerous as smoking around them. In addition, the nicotine solution is far more concentrated than the nicotine in cigarettes, so if your bird were to swallow any of it, there is a high risk of rapid death. E-cigarettes also contain cancer-causing chemicals, like regular cigarettes. Simply put, don't vape around your birds.

Finally, a word about **matches**. Modern safety matches have tips coated with potassium chlorate, sulfur, starch, and a few other ingredients. The striking surface has red phosphorus, which causes a small explosion when the match head is struck on it. We all know birds love to chew on wood, so a match lying around, either before or after being ignited, looks just like a toy to a bird. Ingestion can cause acute poisoning and death, so be sure to store unused matches where birds can't get to them, and keep spent matches far away from birds while they are cooling off. Better yet, run them under cold water and then throw them in the garbage. People use matches for many reasons, not just smoking, so all you nonsmokers out there take care also! Some people leave matches out in bathrooms (no, they don't neutralize the smell, they just mask it) and forget the matches are there and easily accessible to a wandering bird, so be sure to keep them hidden!



If you have friends or family that smoke, these rules apply to them too. Make sure people who smoke don't handle your birds until they are thoroughly scrubbed up!

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