

MAKING A HOME INCUBATOR FOR YOUR BIRD

Ill birds often need supportive care to help them recover. Hospitalization in a veterinary clinic may be required to provide adequate supportive care and to monitor the bird's response to the treatment provided. However, in some cases, especially if your bird is eating well, it may be possible to provide the care at home, in the bird's familiar surroundings. In these cases, it can be helpful for you to make an "incubator" to keep your bird in until it is recovered.

The Container

We recommend using a 10- or 20-gallon aquarium with a mesh top for most smaller birds. Alternatively, a clear Tupperware®/Sterilite®-style container can be used but NUMEROUS ventilation holes/slits need to be made to prevent the bird from suffocating or overheating; there are Tupperware®/Sterilite®-type containers large enough even for macaws. A container with smooth sides is preferred because it prevents the bird from using extra energy climbing around or clinging to the sides. It is for this reason that we recommend against using the bird's regular cage, as the bird will perch on the food bowls or cling to the sides, even with the perches removed. Additionally, preventing climbing is helpful when the bird is at risk of falling, such as with leg injuries or seizure disorders. The container can be partially covered with a towel to provide the bird with privacy (but don't cover up all the air holes!); make sure the container is placed somewhere safe, where it cannot fall or be accessed by other pets in the home.



Example of a Tupperware/Sterilite style incubator. **Important!!** NUMEROUS ventilation holes/slits need to be made to prevent the bird from suffocating or overheating. Note that a perch can be attached through a hole drilled in the side of the plastic container, as shown here.

Warmth

Sick birds need to be maintained at 80-85°F (26-29°C). When birds are sick, they are usually fluffed, indicating they are having a hard time maintaining their body temperature. There are several ways to provide them with additional warmth:

Under Tank Heating Pad

These can be purchased at pet stores in the reptile section; this should be placed UNDER the actual incubator — or can be placed on the SIDE of the incubator. Place it under ½ of the tank so the bird can choose to move away if too hot. To further confirm it is not too hot, it is recommended to place your hand on the bottom of the cage for 5 minutes to make sure it is not uncomfortable to you.



Example of a heating pad under an aquarium style incubator. *



Visit aav.org or find us on Facebook at facebook.com/aavonline

MAKING A HOME INCUBATOR FOR YOUR BIRD

Over Tank Ceramic Heat Emitter

This should be in a 30- to 60-watt size and can be found at many pet stores or online. These can burn your bird if they are a high wattage (e.g., 100-watts) or placed too close to the bird. The 30-watt bulb needs to be placed quite close to the bird to provide warmth (e.g., on top of the mesh). Again, try placing your hand where your bird would be for 5 minutes to make sure it is not too hot.



Example of an over tank ceramic heat emitter.*

Space Heater

Make sure to use something newer without large amounts of metal on the backs and sides. **Avoid space heaters that contain polytetrafluoroethylene (Teflon) which is toxic to birds.** Check safety ratings to make sure the heater will not be a fire risk or produce unsafe fumes. Monitor the temperature in the room to make sure the heater is not making the room too hot.



Example with a space heater.*

***Be sure to check your bird regularly for signs of overheating.
If your bird is too hot, it will hold its wings away from its body and open beak breathe.
A thermometer can be used to monitor the temperature; make sure the bird cannot eat
any part of the thermometer or the heating elements!***

Substrate/Cage Furniture

- For sick birds, we recommend a padded cage floor. A towel can be placed on the floor of the container and changed once or twice daily. If the terry on the towel will catch your bird's toe nails, place a pillow case over it to make the surface smooth.
- Place food and water bowls on the floor right in front of where your bird likes to sit. If your bird is very debilitated, only place a small amount of water in the bowl to eliminate drowning risk.
- If your bird is perching on the food bowls, a LOW perch can be offered (e.g., flat on the towel). One option is to use a piece of PVC pipe or a perch from the cage wrapped with self-adherent bandage material (e.g., VetRap™ or Coban™) and stabilized with PVC pipe fittings or something simple such as tongue depressors taped to the perch.
- Toys are usually not needed for sick birds. However, if the bird would be comforted by a favorite toy to snuggle against, this should certainly be provided.



Example of a low perch stabilized with tongue depressors and covered in VetRap™.*

MAKING A HOME INCUBATOR FOR YOUR BIRD

Important Notes

Please keep in mind that when your bird is sick, it mostly needs to rest. Please give your bird plenty of dark, quiet time each night (at least 12 hours) and allow it to rest most of the day. However, it is still important to visually check on your bird throughout the day to make sure it is not deteriorating; contact your avian veterinarian if you become concerned.

Since birds need to be hospitalized if they are losing weight while ill, it is helpful if you can weigh your bird daily. We recommend using a digital gram scale for this purpose. Ask your veterinarian for AAV's handout on digital scales for more information on this topic.

Remember that a home incubator cannot replace hospitalization for sick birds that need more intensive care such as nutritional and fluid support, injections of medications, and close monitoring by your bird's medical team. Please consult with your avian veterinarian to determine whether hospitalization would be more appropriate than a home incubator for your companion. If you and your veterinarian decide that a home incubator is appropriate for your bird, be sure to ask for guidelines on what clinical signs indicate your bird needs to be returned to the hospital.

AAV: Setting a Standard in Avian Care Since 1980

Avian medicine is a distinct and very specialized field that requires extensive training, advanced skills, and facilities specifically designed and equipped to treat and hospitalize birds. The Association of Avian Veterinarians was established to provide veterinarians with this special education, and to keep them up to date with the latest information on bird health. The AAV holds an annual conference on avian medicine and publishes the peer-reviewed *Journal of Avian Medicine and Surgery*. AAV also makes annual contributions toward avian conservation and sponsors studies advancing the understanding of avian medicine.



Visit aav.org or find us on Facebook at facebook.com/aavonline

For More Information

For more information on birds, ask your veterinarian for copies of the following AAV Client Education Brochures:

- Avian Chlamydiosis and Psittacosis*
- Additional Bumblefoot Brochures (Raptors, Poultry)
- Veterinary Care for Your Pet Bird*
- Basic Care for Companion Birds*
- Behavior: Normal and Abnormal
- Caring for Backyard Chickens
- Caring for Ducks
- Digital Scales
- Feather Loss
- Feeding Birds
- Foraging for Parrots*
- Injury Prevention and Emergency Care
- Managing Chronic Egg-laying in Your Pet Bird
- Signs of Illness in Companion Birds*
- Ultraviolet Lighting for Companion Birds
- When Should I Take My Bird to a Veterinarian?*
- Zoonotic Diseases in Backyard Poultry*

**Available in multiple languages. All others are available in English only at this time.*

Online Resources

Follow AAV on Facebook (www.facebook.com/aavonline) for great tips and the latest news for pet bird owners. You can also find us on Twitter ([@aavonline](https://twitter.com/aavonline)) and YouTube!

Our website, www.aav.org, offers a Find-a-Vet tool to help pet bird owners locate avian veterinarians around the world. We also offer a variety of resources such as basic bird care instructions and more. Visit the website today!

** Photo credit: Andrea Reinprecht Photography*

