Iron Storage Disease

Iron storage disease occurs in some parrots (mostly lories and lorikeets) but mainly in toucans and mynah birds. These birds usually present to the veterinarian for decreased activity and exercise intolerance. Blood work and X-rays may be performed to rule out other causes of these clinical signs, but iron storage disease itself cannot be definitively diagnosed with blood work. With iron storage disease, enlargement of the liver, heart, or spleen is often seen on X-rays and an increase in the hematocrit (red blood cells) is commonly found. A liver biopsy is needed to confirm the condition; this may or may not be recommended, depending on your bird’s general health.

The underlying cause of iron storage disease is not well understood. A genetic predisposition is suspected in some species. Physiological mechanisms that developed to compensate for a low available dietary iron may contribute to iron storage disease. Although the dietary iron requirements of most birds remain unknown, many diets contain high iron concentrations. Current recommendations are for a diet that contains less than 100-ppm iron and low Vitamin C level (< 100 mg/kg), as Vitamin C increases the body’s absorption of iron.

Treatment for iron storage disease may include phlebotomy, (removal of blood in order to reduce the body iron stores), chelation therapy to bind the iron and allow the bird to excrete it, and diet alteration.

Research is continuing into the cause, prevention and treatment of iron storage disease; check with your veterinarian for the most recent information.