

## Foot injuries

In most feral flocks you will see pigeons with deformed feet, missing toes, bleeding feet, walking on stumps and occasionally pulling themselves along on their wings.

Some people will try to put this down to an illness or disease. [Pox](#) is the only pigeons disease that affects the appearance of the feet, but the main cause of the deformities that we see is the carelessness of human beings about the way they dispose of cotton, string, thread, fishing line and even their own hair, which becomes entangled in pigeons feet.

As the pigeon tries to walk the thread or line tightens and cuts off the blood supply. If the both feet are bound together then the bird will be unable to walk and has to resort to pulling itself along on its wings or “wing walking”.

Eventually the tissue below the string will become blackened and die. Individual toes and sometimes the whole foot will be severed, often causing a major bleed. Infection will aggravate the injury.

### Treatment:

In the worst cases the solution may be to have the entire foot amputated below the hock joint by a vet, leaving a stump for the pigeon to walk on. If this happens please ensure that the pigeon is given a course of antibiotics



first.

Fortunately pigeons do very well even when missing one or both feet, so euthanasia is **never** indicated for a foot injury.

One feral pigeon lost both his feet to string damage 11 years ago and is still

around and flying free.

The photo on the left was taken 7 years ago, the foot was amputated and the pigeon is still alive and well but living in the comfort of an aviary with other pigeons for company.

If you don't have a pigeon friendly vet or rescue centre near you, many tangles can be resolved with a small kit comprising such items



as a seam splitter (as demonstrated in the photo) small nail scissors, and small tweezers.

Before you start examine the foot carefully.

**Yellow bits** are a sign of infection that will need to be treated with antibiotics.

**Blackened flesh** is dead but dangerous to poke about in as it could cause a severe bleed. If the string has done significant damage to the foot then it might be a good idea to take it to the vet who will have specialised instruments to do the job and also be able to provide emergency treatment if there is a bleed.

I usually start by rubbing Bach Rescue Cream (available from Boots and Neals Yard in the UK) into the foot, this softens any muck and, in my experience, also loosens the string, probably because it reduces swelling. Some rescuers have reported that Neem Oil is great for loosening the ligatures.

I often have to improvise but these are some of the things I use when treating string injuries:

Baby scissors with blunt ends, because these can be used to snip thread that is embedded into the skin without cutting the flesh.

A seam splitter (a dressmaking tool for picking stitches which has a blunted end) for separating the thread from the flesh before cutting it.

Antibacterial cream, such as F10 to rub in the wound.

Painkiller – I use a single drop of Metacam (available from the vet) in the inside tip of the pigeon's beak as a painkiller

Cotton buds, sterile gauze and cornflour to treat minor bleeds.

A pair of small sharp scissors to cut the thread.

When you examine a bird always ensure that the head is raised so that there is no danger of regurgitation that could cause it to aspirate and die. It sometimes helps to lay a piece of gauze over its face to reduce struggling.

In a lot of cases the thread or string is visible and therefore quite easy to remove just by patiently snipping and unwinding. It sometimes takes several goes, with rests for the pigeon and the rescuer in between. I always cut the bit that links the feet together first.

Then I start with the loosest bits, snipping and gently unwinding, taking care not to pull so that the thread doesn't cut further into the flesh.

If there is any bleeding at all I stop what I am doing, apply direct pressure to the area and hold the foot up in the air to inhibit the blood flow. For major bleeds I have had to use a tourniquet, but the pigeon has also needed treatment for shock.

When all the thread is removed I treat open wounds with antibacterial cream immediately and continue to do that 3 times a day.



Sometimes the thread or string will have tied the back toe inward, or twisted other toes in which case splinting will be required.

Sometimes the pigeon will need a course of antibiotics to fight severe infection.

Sometimes there is a strong possibility that the pigeon will lose the foot even though the thread had been removed. In these cases the pigeon will need to be kept safe for a suitable period of time.