

## **Foot injuries: thread, string, fishing line, missing toes, stumps**



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 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 cases of recent entanglement and fairly loose thread, this can be relatively simple and done on the spot if necessary (I always carry a foot repair kit with me) . When thread is embedded or of long-standing, it can be a delicate

process which is better done at home.

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.



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.

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.

**Neem oil** has been used effectively to loosen deeply embedded thread.

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, so that if the pigeon escapes it is that

little bit better off.

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 if I have had to keep the pigeon in.



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 period of time, either by the rescuer or by a pigeon friendly rescue centre. However, usually if you catch it early enough the pigeon can be released immediately.

**Lumps or pustules on feet, toes and often beak.**



This is very likely to be pigeon pox. It doesn't affect humans but can spread between pigeons via saliva in shared water, baths or through beak to beak fighting or via a bloodsucking insects such as the mosquito.

The disease can be mild and self limiting in feral and racing pigeons, although sometimes they are so badly affected that they can't eat and sometimes can't see, so they need supportive care while the disease runs its course. The internal form is more serious, recognised by yellow deposits in the mouth that resemble trichomoniasis (canker) and often results in death.

In wood pigeons the disease is more serious, often becoming internal, affecting juveniles that have not yet developed a strong immune system, most often in autumn.

### **Loss of Foot, Severe Bleeding**

It is rare, but this can happen and when it does it is frightening so it is best to be prepared.

Sometimes a pigeon with severe thread injury will lose his foot as the combined cutting effect of the thread and the deteriorating blood starved tissues will cause the foot to become detached...but this involves the severing of the artery. It can be dealt with.

The first thing you need to do is to raise the foot to slow down the blood flow. Then press a clean pad of cloth against the stump...it may be necessary to

apply a tourniquet.

The loss of blood can lead to shock, to fight this keep the pigeon quiet and warm, on a hot water bottle or a heat pad such as a Snuggle Safe, or under a 40 watt bulb in a lamp (ideally an angled desk lamp).

The loss of blood can also lead to dehydration, so mix up some rehydration solution (1 pint warm water, 1/2 a dessert spoon of sugar and 1/2 **teaspoon** of salt. Mix it well and pour some into a small container such as a ramekin or an egg cup and lift it to the pigeon's beak allowing the beak to dip in the solution but not covering the nostrils. This should encourage the pigeon to drink. Leave the container close to the bird so that it can top up if required.

The stump will usually heal well enough for the pigeon to walk on it. I have seen pigeons in the wild lose a foot and recover with no human help.

Danny, the pigeon in the photograph, lost both feet and was left with



stumps.

We decided to keep him in the protected environment of the aviary, where he had found a mate while recovering. he lived a long and happy life.

### **Hard ball of poop on pigeon's foot - toes**

This happens quite often when pigeons have injured or deformed feet. they step in poop and gradually a rock-hard ball of poop forms, which is heavy and uncomfortable for the bird.

Don't try to pull the ball off immediately as this could damage the nail sheath. Instead, dissolve a tablespoon of salt in warm water and place the pigeon's foot in it to soak. This loosens the hold that the poop has on the toe very quickly and you will be able to slip the ball off with no pain or damage to the pigeon .

This saline mix is also useful when you have caked formula on the feathers of baby pigeons, just dampen the affected areas and wipe with a damp cloth.