

Pet Bird Nutrition

How often I have spoken with owners or new bird enthusiasts who think seeds are the mainstay of their pet's diet! This is an old, outdated theory that is too often still believed. Birds, like children, need to eat from the four basic food groups. Since seeds represent only the grain group, they do not comprise a complete, nutritious diet.

Today there are many companies that have researched nutritional needs for a variety of bird species. Many of these companies have produced excellent pelleted diets that provide a balance of nutrients. These products should be a major part of your bird's diet-40%-50%.

FRUITS AND VEGETABLES are important sources of carbohydrates, vitamins, and minerals. Vegetables that are good include dark "leafy" vegetables such as kale, broccoli leaves, collards, and beet greens. Also, squash, carrots, peas, beans, and corn are good vegetables to feed. Fruits and fruit juices include oranges, apples, grapes, peaches, berries, melons and many more. Keep away from avocados. These can be deadly! If in doubt about a particular food, call your avian veterinarian for advice. If feeding foods that have a large amount of water content, remember the stools may have a lot of excess urine! (And therefore, larger, voluminous stools.) This category needs to be 20%-25% of the diet.

The **CEREAL** group also provides carbohydrates, amino acids, and B vitamins. The cereal group is composed of whole grain breads, pastas, and granolas (unsweetened). This group should be no more than 10%-15% of your bird's diet.

MEAT/DAIRY GROUP: Meats are good protein sources and contain several essential amino acids. Dairy products are often excellent sources of calcium and vitamin D3. Be careful, dairy products like cheese can have high salt contents. Milk should not be given to birds since sometimes it can result in diarrhea. Good foods from this group include chicken, beef (low fat meats), boiled eggs, yogurts, cottage cheese, etc. This food group should only be about 10% of the diet.

SEED MIXES: Seed could fall in the grains/cereal group. Seeds mostly provide fats/oils (especially sunflower seed and peanuts). Some seeds can provide carbohydrates and some B vitamins. Feeding exclusively seeds can lead to obese birds with severe malnutrition or deficiencies. Often owner point out that a previous pet bird lived quite a long time on this improper diet of only seeds. Just think how much longer they may have lived with the proper diet! Also a pet that gets sick or is somehow compromised is in a better position to respond to treatment than a pet with nutritional deficiencies.

Seeds should never be more than 20%-25% of your pet's diet! Seeds are great for treats, not as a staple of the diet.

VITAMINS/MINERALS: Vitamin/Mineral supplementation is fine for birds. However, this should be a powdered form which is sprinkled over the food. Never put vitamins/minerals in the water.

They can enhance bacterial growths in the water. Some birds, such as budgies, are desert birds and often will drink little water or quit drinking since the taste has changed! (This can lead to erratic or inconsistent dosing—a problem especially when putting antibiotics in the water.) Lastly, some vitamins are quickly disrupted in water and therefore no longer effective. Probably the best way to give your bird vitamins is to get him/her on a large variety of vegetables in the diet.

Calcium is often low in certain groups of birds. Some birds especially prone to calcium deficiencies include the African grey parrot and all egg laying birds. Some ways to boost calcium in the diet is to offer cuttlebones (soft side toward the bird), mineral blocks, and crushed egg shells. Some veterinarians recommend oyster shell (white). I am always concerned about overeating of this grit-like form of calcium. Therefore, I do not recommend or use it. If your bird needs yet more supplementation, talk to your avian veterinarian for other ideas. Owners of African greys especially may want to check calcium levels with the yearly check-ups. This is a good way to monitor calcium levels accurately and possibly avoid problems caused by calcium deficiencies.

Fresh water and food should be given DAILY! Clean all containers before putting in fresh water or food. Bacterial deposits are often formed on the bowls during the day. Not cleaning could be asking your bird to eat/drink large amounts of possibly harmful bacteria!

There are multiple "quick" fix homemade diet additions on the market. One of the easiest and best diets is a corn, bean, rice diet. This requires a little extra work on your part. (A Sunday afternoon however is a great time to mix this recipe.) However, it makes a large amount that can be frozen and used for weeks/months. Any frozen foods that are defrosted and used daily from the refrigerator should be discarded in one week. The CBR diet (described in another handout) is often a great way to introduce a diet change (example: converting a former seed junkie or fatty liver candidate).

Remember, your pet can eat many of the same foods you do. You must approach these foods as if you are eating a truly health conscious diet. (I know many of us don't!)

Several rules to help in feeding tablefoods:

1) First and foremost: "Variety is the spice of life!" To avoid an incomplete nutritional diet and a truly finicky eater, feed lots of different foods.

2) NO grease, salt, sugar, caffeine, or alcohol!!!

3) Stay with a health conscious diet.

4) New foods may take awhile for your bird to get used to eating. Introduce new foods gradually. This will also decrease chance of digestive problems.

5) Clean all food (fresh) from the cage in the evening. It can spoil overnight. Try to leave fresh foods accessible no longer than 4 hours at a time before replacing. Wash all dishes daily.

If you are introducing new foods to a somewhat "uninterested" bird, here are some tips to remember.

1) BE PATIENT!!! BE PERSISTENT!!! Don't ever give up on your pet trying new foods or a balanced diet. This is perhaps the best thing you can ever do for your pet.

2) Often birds do not realize a new food item is food. It is something they have never seen, so they may not understand. Let them see you eating. Then if they seem interested, offer the food again.

3) Try coaxing your pet if it is very tame. This won't work if your pet is very nervous or not tame and may be counterproductive!

4) Put new foods on or near toys, tie on perches, or hang from the top of the cages. Babies are often helped along in the weaning process by playing with the food. This holds true when introducing new food to older birds.

5) Mix the new foods with old favorites. Gradually increase the new food portion while decreasing the old food portion.

6) Try cooked/raw, chopped/whole, different colors (i.e.: red vs. green pepper). Some birds like the consistency of certain foods or the color.

7) If your bird is a seed junkie, remove all seeds that are favorites (ie: sunflowers, peanuts). Offer new foods about an hour before the seeds are offered. If your bird is

slightly hungry, he/she may be more likely to try a new food.

WARNING! Monitor your bird's weight periodically or the amount of muscle mass on the breast. Some birds may pick through foods, but not be eating. This can lead to weight loss which can be dramatic in a short time. Monitor the weight! Any large fluctuations should be reported to your avian veterinarian immediately!

Hopefully, these tips will benefit your bird. Your pet is solely dependent upon YOU! Keep working with your pet. They are individuals also and different approaches may work better for different birds. Call if you have any questions or problems. That's what we are here for--to help!

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