The Truth about Grit

Grit is defined by Webster's as "sand, gravel, or a sharp granule." For many years both bird owners and bird "experts" felt grit was a necessary part of pet bird diets. Somehow they felt the gravel helped grind food and provide trace minerals to the diet. This theory was based on evidence of grit found in wild bird's digestive tracts, usually the ventriculus (gizzard). However, when wild birds forage, they often pick up pieces of foreign material such as sand.

In 1983, the Association of Avian Veterinarians issued a statement that grit was not necessary for seed digestion. They went on to stress that oversupplementation and ingestion may pose serious health problems including impaction of the crop or ventriculus (gizzard).

Grit is not needed to help grind food in the digestive tract. The ventriculus is a very strong grinding organ. As seed is ingested, its shell is removed. The seed moves through the crop where secretions much like saliva help to soften it. From the crop, it goes to the proventriculus which has further digestive enzymes much like the acids in our stomachs break down food. From the proventriculus, it goes to the gizzard whose job by then is reduced to "mashing" and mixing the food before entering the intestines.

Grit is available in many forms. One popular form has always been oyster shell since it served the additional purpose of calcium supplementation. In the past, there have been instances where the oyster shells were contaminated and several birds were developed lead poisoning from the ingestion. Based on this and the fact that larger pieces of oyster shell may not be properly broken down before entering areas where impaction may occur, I do not usually recommend oyster shells to be offered.

Calcium can be supplemented quite effectively through cuttlebones, mineral blocks, crushed egg shells, powder supplements, and high calcium foods.

Some grit mixes contain charcoal in the hopes that it will bind toxins in the digestive tract. While charcoal is used for this purpose in some cases of dog/cat medicine and rare instances in exotic animal medicine, it can cause severe gastrointestinal upset in some birds. Charcoal can also lead to vitamin B deficiencies.

If all the evidence against grit still has not convinced a staunch grit lover, please at least restrain the amount of grit offered to a small amount. The Avian Medicine: Principles and Applications book by Drs. Ritchie, Harrison, and Harrison suggest "A cockatiel-sized bird can be offered five grains of grit biannually; a cockatoo-sized bird can be offered a half-teaspoon of grit biannually."
This clinic's recommendation is to not offer grit at all. Birds will over-eat in some cases of disease and develop impactions that require surgery. Why take unnecessary health risks with your companion? If you have further nutritional or health questions, please feel free to contact us. No question is too irrelevant if you are trying to help better your pet's life!

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Loving Hands Animal Clinic
13775 Highway 9
Milton, Georgia 30004
(770) 667-9022
www.lovinghands.com