

Feeding your Pet Bird a Healthy Diet

All-seed diets are deficient in vitamins, minerals, and amino acids.

In their native habitat, some parrots like cockatiels, budgerigar parakeets, as well as many cockatoos and macaws are seed-eaters. These birds are able to balance their diet because of the large numbers of seeds eaten (over 60 types). Companion birds are often weaned onto all-seed diets, but the number and type of seeds offered in captivity is insufficient to offer a balanced nutrition. Commercial seed mixes lack the normal complement of nutrients including vitamins A, D₃, E and K, certain amino acids (the building blocks of protein), calcium, and other minerals. Over time, seed diets lead to vitamin A deficiency, poor feather quality, and weakening of the immune system, making your pet more susceptible to infections.

The physical and emotional health of your pet bird is affected by its diet.

Feeding a balanced diet keeps your bird healthy and improves the sheen of his feathers. Parrots also seem to require the mental stimulus that comes from foods with different shapes, textures, and colors.

Healthy foods for the pet bird include:

- A high-quality formulated food such as those made by Lafeber Company, Harrison's Bird Foods, or ZuPreem. Formulated foods provide good nutrition in a convenient form, however pellets and extruded foods should never make up the entire diet.
- Offer fresh vegetables and greens daily. Yellow and orange vegetables and dark, leafy greens are an excellent source of vitamin A.
- Dark, leafy greens and hard-boiled or scrambled eggs with the shell are also a great source of calcium. Calcium is required in greater quantities than any other mineral and is needed for healthy bones, normal metabolism, as well as eggshell calcification. A syndrome of low blood calcium (or hypocalcemia) is seen in some African grey parrots so it is particularly important to offer these birds calcium-rich foods.
- Other foods that may be offered to pet birds in small amounts include:
 - Whole grain products such as bread, toast, low sugar or unsweetened cereal, pasta, wheat germ, and wild rice.
 - Nutrient-dense fruits such as berries, mango, and papaya.
 - Nuts like palm nuts or walnuts
- Very infrequently, pet birds may be offered well-cooked meats and boneless white fish.
- A quality seed mix can be a part of a healthy diet, but should never be the main or sole source of food.

Increased energy needs

Birds have increased energy needs during growth, molt, and egg laying. Egg laying is associated with increased needs for dietary protein and calcium. There are also increased protein requirements during molt or feather replacement.

Certain foods serve as triggers for breeding behavior

Bird owners must try to balance the need for stimulation and variety, with the reproductive stimulus that may come from offering an abundance of different foods such as sprouts, greens, high-fat nuts, and berries. The importance of diet in stimulating breeding activity will vary with the species, the individual, and the environment. Warmed soft foods may also stimulate breeding behavior in adult birds and should be avoided.

Grit

Some bird species, like pigeons and doves, or songbirds like canaries and finches, require grit for proper digestion. These birds swallow seeds whole. The presence of grit within the stomach helps to grind the whole seeds. Since parrots remove the shell before swallowing seeds, they do not require grit. Ingestion of the occasional piece of grit is harmless, although the occasional individual will overeat grit when ill or stressed potentially leading to intestinal blockage.

Special requirements

Some species require specialized diets such as the nectar eaters, lorries and lorikeets and soft bills. Some birds like the mynah bird and toucan require a low-iron diet.

Conversion to a healthy diet

Dietary change must be performed gradually. Introduce small amounts of new food at a time, and carefully monitor food consumption and dropping production. See the client handout on “Dietary Conversion” for more information.

Additional considerations

- Provide fresh water at all times.
- Remove old food and clean all food and water dish daily.
- Wash produce thoroughly.
- If products are cooked, do not add salt, sugar, or fat such as butter or margarine to your parrot’s food.
- When feeding a balanced diet, only offer vitamin/mineral supplementation when recommended by your avian veterinarian. Formulated diets fed with supplements may actually lead to over-supplementation of certain vitamins and minerals.

References

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