

BASIC BIRD CARE

Nutrition:

Fortunately for dogs and cats, their food is formulated to meet strict standards of quality and content. The nutritional requirements of dogs and cats, as well as those of chickens, ducks and turkeys, are well known because of years of extensive research and food trials. Unfortunately this is not the case for pet birds. There are no National Research Council (NRC) nutrient requirements established for parakeets, parrots, cockatoos or any other caged birds. Because of this, the manufacturers of foods made for these birds are free to base their products on anything they choose.

As a result, the vast majority of birds presented to veterinarians for diagnosis and treatment are suffering from various stages of malnutrition. Not one commercial seed diet provides the necessary nutrients for a caged bird. There are good pelleted diets on the market that are more nutritionally complete but quality varies widely from brand to brand. As a primary diet, seed mixes are deficient in vitamin A, vitamin D3, calcium, zinc and protein. They are also too high in fat. Other common items fed to cage birds, such as apples, grapes and lettuce, provide little added nutrient value. Cage birds are omnivores like us. They need a diet containing items from all the major food groups just as we do.

Besides providing inadequate nutrition, seed diets may also cause illness. Some seed diets are contaminated with Gram-negative bacteria, which can cause severe gastrointestinal problems, or death, in birds that eat these foods. If you have any doubts as to the wholesomeness of the food you are feeding your birds, bring some in for laboratory analysis. A bacterial culture of the food will determine if bacterial contamination is present.

The most common dietary deficiency seen in birds is vitamin A. Lack of vitamin A causes changes in the linings of the respiratory and digestive tracts. These changes decrease the bird's ability to fight infection, leading to ulcers in the mouth, nose or elsewhere, abscesses and various other diseases of the respiratory and digestive tracts. Well washed, fresh fruits and vegetables should be offered to birds several times weekly. Foods high in vitamin A include winter squash, yams, sweet potatoes, carrots, broccoli, cauliflower, cabbages, parsnips, peppers (including jalapeno), carrot tops, turnip greens and mustard greens.

Another common deficiency is vitamin D3. Vitamin D3 can be found in most bird vitamin supplements, and is necessary for proper bone development and maintenance. Vitamin D3 deficiencies is often associated with calcium deficiency. Foods high in calcium include almonds, calcium-fortified breads and cereals, and dairy products. Try grating some cheese for your small bird or giving larger chunks to a parrot or cockatoo. Some birds also enjoy yogurt or milk. Other sources of calcium include oyster shell and bone meal, but these can be contaminated with heavy metals such as lead. For this reason it is better to stick to real food as a calcium source.

The third common dietary deficiency of birds is protein. A bird requires about 20%

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protein in its diet. Most seed mixes contain only 4-8% protein and are especially lacking in the amino acids lysine and methionine. (Amino acids are the building blocks of protein. In addition to requiring protein in general, animals also have specific requirements for individual amino acids.) Poor feathering, lack of moult and poor disease resistance are the results of dietary protein deficiency. Protein sources include dairy products, meat and poultry, beans, monkey biscuit and dog and cat chows. Pelleted bird diets are also available which contain good levels of protein.

To round out your bird's diet, try feeding fruits (leave out pits and seeds as these can be toxic), rice, potatoes, pasta and bread. Breakfast foods are good choices, especially eggs, cereal and fruit juices. Peanut butter and all varieties of nuts are bird favorites.

Be guided by your common sense when feeding your birds. Serve only the freshest of foods, thoroughly cook all meats and provide a wide variety of fare. Provide plenty of fresh, clean water for both drinking and bathing, and also provide a vitamin supplement.

Birds accustomed to an all seed diet may be very reluctant to switch to a healthier alternative. Start slowly, mixing new foods in with the old at first. Sometimes the bird will get the idea if he sees you eating some of what you are offering. Be patient and DON'T GIVE UP! Your bird's life really does depend on it.

Housing:

Is your bird's cage big enough? Tame birds that are let loose in the house for exercise only need a cage slightly larger than their wing span (enough room to eat, sleep and stretch). Birds that are confined to their cage need as large a home as possible. A bird confined to a small cage for life will be a deprived and unhappy one. Birds that are frustrated and bored are very prone to stress related illnesses, including obesity, feather-picking and respiratory diseases. A happy bird is usually a healthier bird, so give your feathered friend plenty of room to exercise and play.

Keep clean bedding or newspaper on the floor of the cage as spoiled food and dried droppings cause your bird to breathe infected dust particles (fungus, mold, and bacteria). Walnut shells are preferred over corn cob shells or wood shavings as bedding. Newspaper or other scrap paper is just as good and more economical. To save time in cleaning, layer the paper and remove one layer each day. Your bird's cage, perches and toys should be thoroughly cleaned once a week to prevent mold and bacteria from building up. During your bird's first health check-up it's a good idea to bring him in his regular cage instead of a carrier. This way your veterinarian can evaluate the environment you've chosen for him.

Here are some other tips for the care of your pet birds:

Did you know that non-stick cookware can kill your bird? Teflon and Silverstone are coated with polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE) which produces toxic fumes when overheated. These fumes can kill birds in a matter of minutes. If PTFE-coated products are left unattended on a burner or in an oven on a high setting, their temperatures can rise well above 530 degrees, the temperature at which the fumes become toxic. PTFE-coated drip pans and reflector bowls can reach these high temperatures even under normal use. Hopefully, manufacturers will soon develop alternatives to the use of PTFE. Several companies are also considering the use of warning labels on these products. Until then, be careful with the use of your non-stick cookware.

Because of their high metabolic rate and delicate immune systems birds can sicken

and die very quickly. If you notice any diarrhea, sneezing, listlessness, lack of appetite or any other symptoms, you should contact your veterinarian immediately and follow these tips until you take your bird in:

- 1) Increase the temperature in your bird's cage to 75 or 80 degrees. (Covering the cage with an electric blanket or heating pad usually works best.)
- 2) Offer his favorite foods in order to keep him eating. You can also add a small amount of Gatorade to his water during times of illness.
- 3) On the day of your appointment, place a piece of wax paper on the floor of the cage to catch droppings. Bring it along so your veterinarian can evaluate his stool, as it is a good indicator of several illnesses in birds.
- 4) Be sure to warm up your car before taking your bird outside and keep his cage covered to minimize stress.