

Feeding your Pet Bird a Healthy Diet

For a period of time, it was believed that birds should be fed on a seed diet especially since they seem to love it and will choose seeds over other foods. But it's the same as us eating junk food every day, although tastier it is high in fat and lacks essential nutrients such as vitamins and minerals. Seed diets also allow birds to be more selective and will choose the tastier things that are often poorly nutritious for example sunflower seeds.

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 obesity, vitamin A deficiency, poor feather quality, and weakening of the immune system, making your pet more susceptible to infections and organ problems.

Parrots also seem to require the mental stimulus that comes from foods with different shapes, textures, and colours.

Birds that are converted to a well-balanced healthy diet generally live longer, have brighter colours and higher activity levels.

Healthy diet for the pet bird includes:

- 60% of the diet made up of a high-quality formulated/pelleted food such as those made by Vetafarm and Harrison's Bird Foods.



- 40% of the diet should be 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 need for healthy bones, normal metabolism, as well as eggshell calcification.
- Other foods that may be offered to pet birds in **small** amounts include:
 - o Nutrient-dense fruits such as berries, mango, and papaya.
 - o Nuts like palm nuts or walnuts
- A quality seed mix can be a small part of a healthy diet but should never be the main or sole source of food; often just used as treats.

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.

Special requirements

Some species require specialized diets such as the nectar eaters, lorries and lorikeets.

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 droppings.

Additional tips:

- Provide fresh water at all times.

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- 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
- When feeding a balanced diet, only offer vitamin/mineral supplementation when recommended by your avian veterinarian. Formulated diets fed with extra supplements may actually lead to problems

Converting your Bird to a Healthy Diet

Converting an All-seed diet bird to a well-balanced pelleted diet is sometimes frustrating for owners but there are several different ways of successfully and safely convert, the trick is to find which one works for your feathered friend.

Before beginning a dietary conversion, your bird should be evaluated by your avian veterinarian to ensure he is healthy and of a normal weight and body condition.

Tips for Conversion to a Balanced Diet

- Dietary conversion should be a very gradual process. Gradually increase the proportion of healthy food offered.
- Monitor weight and droppings closely.
- Provide a variety of food colours, shapes, and textures. For instance, a healthy food like sweet potato may be fed raw, cooked, mashed, diced, sliced, and pureed.
- Produce that is relatively sweet like corn, grapes, and apples are not particularly nutrient-dense, but do often make a fantastic transitional food. Once your seed junky is eating some produce, gradually offer more nutritious foods like dark, leafy greens as well as orange vegetables like sweet potato and carrots.
- The grains and seed present in foraging diets like Lafeber Nutri-Berries, Harrison's Bird bread, and Nutri-Meals often promote conversion to a wholesome diet.
- Small parrot species sometimes like to peck at large chunks of produce like Harrison's Bird Bread fastened to the bars of the cage.
- Parrots enjoy drama and are naturally curious. Be enthusiastic as you pick up a new food item.



Savour it (or at least pretend to), and then quickly offer some to your bird. As a social eater, he may accept the food item.

- Parrots are also playful. Make food fun by winding greens through the bars or creating kabobs. Many parrots also enjoy leaf bathing with large, wet leaves of greens on the top of the cage. In turn, leaf bathing may lead to leaf eating.
 - Ground-feeding birds such as cockatiels and budgerigar parakeets like to eat on flat surfaces. Sprinkle a formulated diet like crumbled pellets onto the table mixed with seed. Look intently at the food, and start pecking at it like a bird would by picking up individual pieces quickly with your thumb and forefinger.
- Later, place food on plastic lids on the bottom of the cage to maintain interest in these items.
- Technique. Have another person feed you in front of your parrot. This will interest your bird and entice them to try the new food.
 - Providing choices may be helpful when offering formulated foods such as pellets or extruded diets. Offer several quality brands such as Harrison's Bird Foods and Vetafarm.
 - Large parrots may also be fed meals twice daily instead of offered food free choice. This may keep these individuals hungry enough to better accept new foods. Never withhold food from small or medium-sized birds.
 - What is your pet's favourite meal? If he is his hungriest in the morning, then that is a great time to offer new foods.

Cautions

- A wide variety of foods given to an adult bird may signal the onset of breeding season and promote reproductive activity

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- By the same token, soft, warm foods may mimic regurgitation of foods, a reproductive behaviour associated with pair bonding.

When converting your bird to a healthy diet, be patient and persistent. Dietary conversion generally takes months and involves the waste of some food, but it is worth the effort! Remember that you are making a change that will impact your bird's health forever. If any of the following should occur: a change in behaviour, droppings or weight; or you are unsure about your bird's health call your avian veterinarian and reschedule the diet conversion.