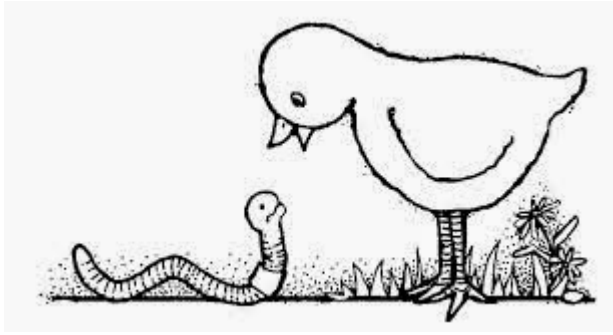


Avian Nutrition



PET SUPPLIES PLUS
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written by an avian veterinarian

the information on this care sheet is a basic overview and not a substitute for veterinary care. For more information and to find a qualified avian veterinarian, go to www.AAV.org.

Nutrition is one of the most important aspects to keeping your pet bird healthy. Improper nutrition (a seed only diet) is one of the biggest reasons for the health problems we see in birds. Many people still believe that birds can be fed a seed only diet but much research has proven this does not meet their needs. By providing a diverse diet made up of pellets, fruits and veggies, and a small amount of seeds and nuts, birds can live much longer, healthier, and happier lives. Be sure to talk about nutrition at your annual veterinarian visit to discuss diet recommendations for your particular bird.

General diet recommendations:

Cockatiels, Budgies, Finches, and Canaries:

- 50% pellets
- 25% table foods/fruits/vegetables
- 25% seed

Most parrots:

- 70% pellets
- 25% table foods/fruits/vegetables
- 5% seeds and nuts

Doves & Pigeons:

- 50% seed
- 30% pellets
- 20% table foods/fruits/vegetables

Seeds and Nuts

In the wild, birds eat more than just seeds - many also incorporate fruit, nuts, berries, bark, leaves, roots, and insects into their diet. In captivity, an all seed diet is not a complete diet. Seeds and nuts are junk food for birds because many are high in fat (such as sunflower and millet) and low in nutrients. Birds will often prefer one type of seed and preferentially eat those leaving other types untouched.

This leads to an unbalanced diet which leads to obesity, vastly shortened lifespan, nutritional diseases, and heart disease. Since peanuts grow underground, they can contain a fungus which can build up in the liver causing liver disease in birds that receive a lot of these legumes.

Pelleted Diets

Most birds should have pellets make up the bulk of their diet. Pelleted diets are a much better option for our birds because they have been formulated to be nutritionally complete similarly to the diets for cats and dogs. They come in a variety of shapes, colors, and sizes. The best pelleted diet is the one that your bird will eat. Species specific pelleted diets are also available. This is important for species such as African greys and macaws that require higher fat in their diet. Mynahs, toucans, and lorries require special diets containing low iron. Birds that are overweight, laying eggs, very active, raising young, or molting will require higher protein and energy.

Table Food, Fruits, and Vegetables

Variety is the spice of life for birds. A well balanced diet should be supplemented with fresh fruits and vegetables. Healthy table food can also be offered but avoid fatty, salty, greasy, or sugary foods. Chocolate, avocados, and onions should also be avoided. Many birds also benefit from watching their owners eat, so if you have a healthy diet, your bird probably will too. If you have a picky bird that will only eat fruit, try steaming the vegetables or cutting them into very small pieces and mixing them in food. Whole grain rice and pastas, beans, and vegetables can be cooked into a "mash" which can then be frozen in separate convenient baggies and then thawed as needed. These recipes can be found on the internet and are a great way to get birds that will only eat table food to eat their veggies!

Supplements

Birds on a proper diet of 50-70% pellets will not need vitamin supplements. During the conversion process, you can sprinkle a pinch of powdered vitamins on soft food or bread daily. We do not recommend vitamins added to the water as they are a source of bacterial growth and vitamins break down quickly in water. Birds that require more calcium such as African greys, conures, and those laying eggs should have a cuttlebone, calcium block, or oyster shell grit at all times. Some parrots will accept a piece of fruity-flavored "Tums" which contains calcium, several times weekly. Grit is often recommended for canaries, finches, doves, and pigeons but usually not required by other bird species.

Pellet Diet Conversion

Switching to a pelleted diet can be tricky for birds that have been eating seeds for years but it can be done with patience and persistence over a period of days to weeks! A word of caution: gradually introduce pellets while still providing the current diet. This is especially important for small birds,

which might starve if they don't eat the new food. Also, do not change the diet if your bird is sick. Always monitor the bird's behavior and stools during any diet change.

Some of our favorite methods include:

- 1) Mix pellets with regular seed. Place 75% of the bird's regular diet in the bottom of their food dish. Place 25% of the new pelleted diet on top of the bird's regular diet. The bird will have to eat around the new diet to get to its old diet, hopefully ingesting a pellet or two while doing so. Over a period of days to weeks, gradually add more pellets and decrease the amount of seeds until there is only a sprinkling of seeds on the bottom of the bowl. After a few days of this mixture, provide a bowl of only pellets in the morning. Monitor your bird to ensure they are eating the pellets and still producing feces. The feces may be a different color because of the color of the pellets but should never be black or much smaller than the regular stool. If you don't notice the bird eating pellets, replace the seed/pellet mixture in the afternoon. Do not go for more than 4 hours for small birds such as finches, canaries, budgies, and cockatiels or they could starve to death.
- 2) Birds learn to eat by watching other birds or humans around them. Pretend you are eating the pellets and really enjoying them. Offer them to another family member and give them lots of attention or praise. Pick at the pellets with your fingers and crumble them in your fingers.
- 3) Smaller birds such as budgies and cockatiels can be "tricked" by placing pellets on a mirror. They may notice the "other bird" interested in them and start eating them.
- 4) Soak the pellets in fruit or vegetable juice and offer them soft. Many birds prefer the soft pellets. If your bird already eats human food, you can mix the pellets into that food.
- 5) Birdy breads can be offered to birds that like bread products with the pellets baked inside. Lafeber's Avi-cakes® and Nutri-berries® (Lafeber Co, Cornell, IL) also contain pellets and can also be offered.
- 6) Don't give up! Continue trying new ways. As a last resort, ask your veterinarian to board your bird and help convert it to pellets. Birds will sometimes try new things in new environments.

Foraging

Recent studies have shown that birds prefer to forage or work for their food rather than have it presented to them in a bowl right beside their perch. Birds actually want to work for the food to stay healthy but they must be taught how to do

so. You can easily help them do this by moving the food bowls up high and down low in the cage. Make them take more than just a few steps to get to their food. Try placing shredded paper over their food bowls so they have to eat around the paper to get their food. For larger birds, wrap treats into paper wads and place them in a small cardboard box they have to shred to get into. Use a small enough box, depending on the species, so the bird does not use it as a nest box. There are lots of toys that can be combined with food items to get birds to play and chew as they would in the wild. Get more foraging ideas from your veterinarian!

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