



## Avian Nutrition Guidelines

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Proper nutrition is the key to a long life, resistance to disease and a happy bird! **The Problem with Seeds and Nuts** will require higher protein and energy. Special pellet formulations are available to meet these individual needs. Your annual veterinary visit is the best time to discuss the specific nutritional needs that apply to your particular bird(s).

It has been estimated that 80% of the health problems seen in cage birds are caused in part by poor nutrition. Because nuts and seeds are high in fat and low in protein, vitamins and minerals, an all seed diet is not a complete diet for any bird.

Just like a child, who would rather eat a cookie than a healthy snack, a parrot will select only the foods it wants and often refuse other, more nutritious foods. Seeds appeal to a parrot's sense of taste and ability to crack things open with its beak. In the wild, birds eat seeds and nuts that are fresh from the plant. Our captive companions eat seeds and nuts that have been harvested and stored for many months, which lowers the nutritional value.

A bird that eats too many seeds and nuts has a greater likelihood of becoming overweight, having a shortened lifespan and developing infections or illnesses such as heart disease. The same thing would happen to a person eating buttered popcorn and candy bars all the time. Some seeds, like sunflower may contain pesticides. In addition, some peanuts may contain mold toxins. Over time, these toxins are harmful to the liver.

### **Nutrition Goals – Balance & Variety**

So what should our feathered friends be fed? Research on the nutrition of captive birds has lead to the development complete than seed alone. Several companies make well-balanced pelleted diets suitable for different sizes and species of birds.

For most birds, pellets should make up the bulk or "most course" of the diet. These pelleted diets can be supplemented with healthy table foods such as of fresh fruits and vegetable, rice, and cooked eggs and beans. Foods to avoid include: chocolate, sugary, salty or greasy foods, alcoholic and caffeinated beverages, avocados, and onions. A small portion of the diet may include seeds and nuts, usually reserved for special treats and training aids.

Some species, such as African greys and macaws require higher fat in their diet. Mynahs, toucans, and lorries require special diets containing low iron. Birds that are very active, laying eggs, raising young or molting

General diet recommendations:

#### Most Parrots:

70% pellets  
25% table foods  
5% seeds and nuts

#### Cockatiels, Finches & Canaries:

50% pellets  
25% table foods  
25% seeds

Because some cockatiels may be prone to kidney problems, it is not recommended that cockatiels eat more than 50% pellets.

### **Supplements**

You will not need a vitamin supplement when your bird is eating at least 50-70% pellets. During the conversion process, however, sprinkle a pinch of powdered vitamins on soft food or bread daily. Vitamins sprinkled on seeds will only fall off when the hull is cracked. Vitamins degenerate quickly in water and favor the overgrowth of bacteria. Birds that are on 70-100% pellets should not take supplements or toxicity may occur. African greys, conures and birds that are laying eggs require more calcium. Be sure to provide a mineral block, cuttle bone or oyster shell grit at all times. Some parrots will accept a piece of fruity-flavored "Tums," which contains calcium, several times weekly.

### **"Seed Junkie"**

#### **Conversion Strategies – be Patient, Persistent and Creative!**

It is often difficult to convince a bird to try other foods once it has become "addicted" to seeds. Birds can also get hooked on one or two types of "people food" just as they can on one or two types of seed. Be patient and keep trying new things. Some birds will take to pellets immediately, but in general, expect the process to take days to weeks.

The following are some good ideas to try:

1. Mix pellets with regular seed. We want the bird to know that the pellets are something it can eat. Gradually increase the amount of pellets while decreasing the amount of seed. Birds will learn that the new pellet is a food item. Expect the bird will throw most of the pellets out of its dish at first! If you see crumbled pellet dust, you know the bird has tasted it. Expect your bird's stools to reflect the color of the pellets they are eating.
2. After the bird has grown accustomed to the sight of the pellets in its seed dish, remove the seed for a few hours in the morning and offer only pellets. Birds will likely sample pellets as they get hungry. In the afternoon, replace the seed even if the bird doesn't eat any of pellets. For small birds (finches, canaries, budgies and cockatiels), do not withhold seed for more than 4 hours. Some birds have starved to death from overzealous pellet conversion!
3. Birds like to eat with their flock and are stimulated by watching another person or bird eat. Pretend to eat the pellets yourself while smacking your lips and saying, "mmm." Offer them to a family member or another bird, giving lots of attention and praise.
4. Some small birds like budgies and cockatiels prefer very small pieces. Crumble the pellets with a rolling pin or between sheets of newspaper and offer them in powdered form. If your bird is tame, crunch the pellets with your fingers in front of the bird on a flat surface. Birds will often become interested when they see your fingers picking at food.
5. Try Lafeber's *Avi-cake* or *Nutriberry* treats – a half-seed, half-pellet combination.
6. Soak the pellets in fruit or vegetable juice and offer them soft. A good one to try is apple juice. If your bird likes soft food, you can try mixing the pellet in something it already likes. See the soft food recipe below for another idea:

#### Rice & Vegetable Soft Food Recipe

- 1 cup brown rice
  - 2 cups water
1. Cook rice until done, cool.
    - 1/2 cup Bulgur wheat
    - 1 cup water
  2. Bring wheat and water to boil, cook about 10 minutes.
    - 1/3 cup Mixed dry beans
    - 3/4 cups water
  3. Cook beans until done, drain, and cool.
    - 1 lb. Frozen mixed vegetables
  4. Combine all ingredients and mix thoroughly.
  5. Pack in individual containers and keep frozen.
  6. Thaw as needed.
  7. Don't leave mix in cage for more than 8 hours or spoilage may result.

7. Remember the old saying, "Polly want a cracker?" Finicky birds often like bread products and you can conceal pellets in bread. See the bread recipe below:

#### "Birdy Bread"

- 1 package corn or bran muffin mix
  - 2 eggs
  - 3 large jars of baby food (sweet potato, carrots, squash, spinach, broccoli)
  - 1/2 cup of bird pellets
1. Mix all ingredients well.
  2. Spread evenly in a well-greased pan.
  3. Bake at 400 degrees until a knife inserted into the center comes out cleanly.
  4. Cool, cut into squares, freeze or refrigerate until ready to serve.

If birds pick out the pellets and drop them, try crushing them with a mortar and pestle or rolling pin, or soaking them in fruit or vegetable juice before adding the other dry ingredients.

