

Nutrition for Psittacine Birds
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It is a common misunderstanding that seeds are a sufficient diet for companion birds. After all, we fill our feeders for wild birds with seeds, right? What isn't always obvious is that, while wild birds enjoy the seeds we provide, they also forage for a wide variety of other foods including plants, insects, nectar, and for some species other small animals. The same is true for cockatiels, parakeets, macaws and other parrots. In their natural setting they consume an almost unbelievable variety of foods.

The truth about seed diets is that they are comparable to other treat foods, like Oreo cookies. Seeds are very high in fat, and deficient in other nutrients such as vitamin A and vitamin D. A parrot that eats nothing but nuts and seeds over the long term is susceptible to liver disease, skin and feather problems, obesity and many other medical conditions. What should we feed our pet birds, then?

Our current dietary recommendation for maintaining a happy, healthy avian companion includes a combination of manufactured pelleted bird food, healthy fresh foods, and a small amount of treat foods. Pelleted diets are made by several reputable pet food companies and are widely available in pet stores or from veterinarians in most areas. These diets are formulated based on current knowledge of the dietary requirements of birds. We recommend that pellets comprise 60-70% of your birds diet. 30-40% of the diet should be a variety of fresh, healthy foods. This group can include clean, fresh fruits and vegetables (raw or cooked), cooked pasta and rice, salt and butter-free popcorn, anything that is healthy, low fat, and low salt. Things that you should not feed your bird include, chocolate, avocados, onions, and high-fat, salty foods. Treat foods should make up less than 10% of the diet. Included in this category are seeds, treat sticks, spray millet, and nuts.

Now, how do you get your pet to eat this healthy new diet? The most important thing is to make any dietary changes gradually. Birds can be very stubborn, particularly if they are accustomed to eating a very tasty diet of mostly treat foods. Some birds may actually starve themselves before they will eat an unfamiliar diet; so make sure you see your bird eating as you are introducing diet changes! Start by placing a layer of your pet's regular diet in his regular food bowl, and cover it with a layer of pellets. In this bowl, gradually decrease the amount of seeds and increase the amount of pellets. Mixing foods simply teaches your bird to select what she prefers out of the dish, so layering is preferred. In addition, add a second food dish near your bird's favorite perching spot. This will usually be near the highest perch in the cage. Put just the pelleted diet in this dish. Moist foods such as pasta, fruits and vegetables should be offered in a separate dish from dry foods, and should be removed from the cage after a few hours. These foods will support the rapid growth of bacteria if left in the cage long term.

Monitor your birds eating habits, and be creative! For stubborn cases, try offering just pellets for a while in the morning when you bird is the most hungry. You can try making pellets tastier by soaking them in natural fruit juice. Some birds may take several months before they will accept a new diet, but be patient. Most can be converted, and remember – it is the best thing for the health of your bird!