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BIRD NUTRITION

Proper and adequate bird nutrition combined with proper husbandry is probably the single most important factor in insuring that your pet bird lives a long healthy life. The good husbandry aspect is very straightforward; supply your companion with a roomy, clean environment with full spectrum lighting, plenty of toys, quality time with yourself, regular veterinary care and most importantly plenty of mental and physical stimulation. The proper and adequate nutrition aspect is much more complicated and complex.

A high-quality nutritional program for all psittacine species should include fresh clean water, washed vegetables and fruit, grains, legumes, sprouts, beans, nuts, pellets, people food, and limited amounts of seed. Basically the bird needs to eat a "health food" diet. If it is healthy and good for us then it is what your bird should be eating.

Three facts are true about the nutrition of birds:

1. None of these birds would, in the wild, eat a diet of high oil seeds (sunflower, safflower, peanuts, etc.)
2. The use of oil seeds as the foundation of a bird's diet leads to nutritional deficiencies and eventually death.
3. The birds that live to old age eat a wide variety of foods, often eating from the table with their owners.

There is nothing particularly lethal about these seeds, nor is one type better or worse than another. They are simply inadequate in their nutrition to supply the birds' needs; they have a nutritional value similar to a chocolate bar. If you think about the last time you purchased cooking oil, your choices were sunflower, safflower, corn, canola (grape seed), peanut, etc. Now visualize the "deluxe parrot mix" you just purchased. They are the same types of seed! While it may be true that birds have access to and eat seed in the wild, the differences are enormous. Those seeds would be growing, and more importantly, would be available only at certain times of the year. Also, they are often the seeds of leguminous trees, palm fruits and nuts.

Supplements will not fix a bad diet and are probably not needed if you have a good diet. Vitamins can be used to fix a short-term problem, and there are times where high levels of a vitamin are beneficial. Remember, though, if you are eating nothing but chocolate bars every day, a vitamin tablet is not going to make your diet complete.

Since we can never hope to provide our birds with all the things that would be available to them in their natural habitats, the best solution is to offer a variety of healthy foods in reasonably balanced amounts.

It is also important that whatever we choose be easy and convenient, because if it is too complicated or time-consuming, we might not continue to do it. After all, dishing up seeds is easy. Therefore, you must find a system that works for you.

PROVIDING A BALANCED DIET

No single diet can provide total nutrition for a pet bird, and variety is the key to success. The following are examples of what can be fed from various food groups and a discussion of commercially-made bird diets.

Commercial Bird Diets

These diets are becoming more acceptable as the staple diet for many species, from canaries to macaws. There is a wide variety on the market from granules to colored pellets. Some diets claim to be complete, but this is rarely the case. Although these diets have proven to be useful in correcting nutritional problems in many birds, we do not recommend that this be the only diet that is fed. Not only is it important to provide variety to insure that all dietary requirements are met, but birds are extremely intelligent. In the wild they would spend a large part of their day searching for and obtaining their food. When we provide them with a dry diet that is exactly the same every day, they can become bored and develop such behaviors as overeating, feather picking and tearing up their surroundings (more than usual!)

** Some birds have starved to death when converted too quickly to a commercial diet. Follow the manufacturer's instructions and change the cage papers daily to monitor the number of droppings being produced. If the number is decreased, or if there is only liquid (urine) being passed for more than 24 hours, return the bird to its former diet and consult your veterinarian. **

The following food groups contain approximate percentages of a basic natural diet, for a generic parrot-type bird, without a significant amount of a commercial diet.

Fruits and Vegetables

These foods should be given twice daily and constitute 20-25% of the bird's diet. They are an excellent source of carbohydrates and many essential vitamins and minerals. Examples of good vegetables are peas, corn, carrots, white potatoes, squash, dark leafy vegetables, broccoli, cauliflower, brussel sprouts, blanched (slightly cooked) sweet potato, etc. Good fruit choices are apples, melons, oranges, berries, bananas, pears, peaches, pomegranates (seeds are the best part of this fruit, etc. Do not give seeds or pits.) Of course, make sure foods are washed thoroughly. Juicier fruits often cause more voluminous soft stools with excess liquid (urine) when fed in large quantities. This is not a health problem. Fruit juices may also be offered.

Breads and Cereals

This component should constitute 10-15% of the bird's diet and should be given two times a day. They are an excellent source of certain amino acids, carbohydrates and B vitamins. Good sources include whole grain breads and rice, unsweetened breakfast cereals, granola, tortillas and cooked pasta.

Protein

High protein foods should make up about 10-20% of the bird's diet and should be given two times daily. These items spoil quickly, so they should not be left in the cage too long, especially on warm days. Examples of protein-rich foods are cooked lean meats, tofu, beans, light-colored cheese and cooked eggs. The following cooked beans are good to use as a protein source for your bird: pinto, black, lentils, barley, whole green peas, mung, kidney, garbanzo or chick peas. If your bird has a problem with obesity, then eggs and cheese should be omitted from their diet.

Seed Mixes

Nuts are a nutritious part of a bird's diet and are a BIG favorite of most if not all parrots! However, no more than 20% of the bird's diet should be in the form of seeds. The following nuts are healthy,

again in moderation and according to the fat metabolism capabilities of the specific species: almonds, cashews, brazil, walnuts, pecans, almonds, macadamia, and pistachios (undyed and unsalted). Seeds provide carbohydrates, fat, protein and some B vitamins. Grain seeds such as millet, canary seed, corn, wheat, brown rice and oats can be left in small amounts in the cage. Try to severely limit oil seeds, such as sunflower, safflower and peanuts. It might be best to use these as hand-fed special treat foods. (For example, a medium-sized parrot like an Amazon might get only 10 to 15 of these seeds a day).

Vitamin and Mineral Supplementation

If you are feeding a formulated commercial diet, it is generally not necessary to use much vitamin supplementation. Use a powdered supplement and lightly "salt" the soft food once a day. If you are using a commercially prepared diet as more than 50% of the bird's diet, DO NOT add any vitamins unless recommended by your veterinarian.

Liquid vitamins added to the water are not recommended for many reasons. Many species of birds drink very little water so would get very little of the vitamins. Some birds may refuse to drink the water altogether. Liquid vitamins quickly lose their potency in water. Finally, they lead to fouling of the water and establish a bacterial breeding ground if the water is not changed frequently.

Calcium is a very important mineral, especially for the African Grey and egg-laying cockatiel. For this reason, additional calcium must be provided in the form of a cuttlebone (soft side toward the bird), white oyster shell, or mineral blocks. Other, more potent products are available through your veterinarian, should your pet require extra supplementation.

Water

Fresh water must always be available and changed at least once a day. Water cups should be thoroughly cleaned each day. Depending on the water quality in your area, you may consider using bottled water for your bird.

Table Food

Most table food is okay for birds, but the following is poisonous! Never feed: avocado, caffeine, chocolate, rhubarb, sprouted lima beans, fava and navy beans. Cooked rice and pasta (both raw and cooked) have a place in your birds diet. They can eat eggs, dairy products, including yogurt, ice cream & cheese, as well as meat (fat removed), poultry, pasta, whole grain breads, vegetables and fruits.

After reading all of this, you may be thinking, "Hey, my bird can eat many of the same foods that I do!" This is true as long as what you eat is considered healthy for you. Allowing your bird to share regular meals with you is an excellent way to strengthen the human/animal bond and makes your bird a real part of the family. But in doing so, please keep the following rules in mind:

1. Nothing greasy, salty or sugary
2. No caffeine or alcohol
3. No avocados
4. No chocolate
5. Stick with a "health food" type diet
6. Give a wide variety of foods
7. Introduce new foods gradually
8. Do not leave fresh food in the cage for more than 4 hours (especially high protein foods)
9. Remove table food from the cage in the evening
10. Wash all food and water dishes daily

HOME-MADE DIETS IDEAS

Corn Bread Mix

This is a method of sneaking new food into your bird's diet. Start with a standard boxed corn bread mix. When adding the egg, also crush and add the shell for calcium. Add a few tablespoons of grated or chopped vegetables, sprouts, dried fruits, etc. Your imagination is the limit! Bake the bread, cool, cut pieces into the size the bird can handle and refrigerate (it will keep 4-5 days).

Bird Bread

Stir together 4 cups of one of the following: whole wheat flour, graham flour, or muffin mix + 2/3 cup brown sugar + 4 eggs (with crushed shells) + 1 cup ripe banana + ½ cup chunky peanut butter + ½ cup total of raisins, currants, coconut, shredded carrots, apples or zucchini + 2 tablespoons baking powder + 1 teaspoon nutmeg + 1 teaspoon cinnamon + 1 cup milk. Stir together, adding enough milk to make a thick batter, depending on whether you make a loaf or muffins. Place into greased pans (1 loaf pan, 1 – 9" cake pan) or paper-lined muffin cups. Bake at 350 until bread springs back when touched lightly and browned on top.

CORN/BEAN/RICE AVIAN MIX

The following are instructions on how to prepare a good basic diet mix for most hardbill birds ranging from finches to macaws.

The mix consists of four prime ingredients:

1. Rice (Brown or White) – Cook according to package directions. Brown rice is more nutritious than white, therefore it is recommended. DO NOT use Minute or converted rice, since they have the least nutritive value.
2. Beans – Canned or frozen (thawed, not cooked) kidney, pinto, lima, butter, navy, lentil, garbanzo, or any other "seed type" bean is acceptable. Raw beans may be used, but must be cooked first. Drain liquid prior to mixing with other ingredients. For smaller birds (cockatiels and smaller), chop beans into small chunks.
3. Mixed Vegetables – Use one portion of mixed vegetables with one portion of corn. Frozen vegetables which are thawed, not cooked, are preferred.

Combine the rice, beans and vegetables. Divide this mixture into daily feeding amounts and package in individual freezer bags. This way, up to a four-week supply can be made at one time. Then each day, remove a bag from the freezer and thaw. All food should be removed each evening, because this mixture may spoil if left out for more than 12 hours.

Changes in birds' droppings are normal with any dietary change. With this diet, droppings appear lighter in color, larger and moister. In some cases, if the change is too rapid or dramatic, diarrhea, excess fluid or vomiting may result. Contact your veterinarian for further instructions. Regular weigh-ins may give owners peace of mind that their bird is not "starving".

Be patient and persistent. Keep reminding yourself that this is for your bird's own good, even though he will try to convince you otherwise. Eventually, your bird will eat the full portion of the diet, and actually enjoy it! In the long run, it will help keep your pet bird alive and healthy for many years to come.

If you have any questions or problems, please do not hesitate to call us at (630) 737-1281.