Basic Bird Nutrition

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A balanced diet is a necessity to allow the bird to live a full and healthy life. **An unbalanced diet is the main cause of disease and early death in pet birds.** Malnutrition is a human-made disease. Fortunately, it is also preventable. Owners must be the ones to actively study avian nutrition. It is much easier to start a young bird on a varied diet of healthy foods than it is to convert an older bird to a new diet. A bird on an unhealthy diet must slowly (over several months) be converted to a healthier diet.

Seed-eating birds

Even for seed-eating birds, seeds alone are not a proper diet. Even when multiple types of seed are offered, the seed-only diet will not supply the necessary array of vitamins and minerals that is needed for optimal health. Birds love seeds like children (and adults) love candy. They'll eat a favorite seed over what is healthy for them. The best diet for most seed-eating birds consists of pelleted foods (65-80% of diet), vegetables (15-30% of diet), a small amount of fruit (5% of diet) and an occasional treat.

Formulated diets are readily available from many reputable manufacturers, pet stores, and veterinarians. The food is a blend of grains, seeds, vegetables, fruits, and various types of proteins, as well as additional vitamins and minerals. The ingredients are mixed and then baked. The food may be in the form of pellets, crumbles, or nuggets. Unlike a seed mixture, the bird cannot select particular components out of a formulated diet, so nutritional imbalances are much less likely to occur. There are commercial foods for different species, so be sure to select one appropriate for your bird. Some have higher fat levels for many of the macaws and Golden conures, whereas others may be lower in fat and higher in protein to provide better nutrition for cockatoos and Amazons.

Vegetables are a good source of vitamins, minerals, and carbohydrates. Small amounts of fruit can also provide some nutrition. Wash all fruits and vegetables thoroughly before feeding. Remove the pits and apple seeds from the fruit. Any fruits and vegetables left uneaten should be discarded daily so spoiling is not a problem. Because fruits and vegetables are high in water content, the urine portion of the droppings will increase.

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Non-seed eating birds

Diets for non-seed eating birds such as Lories and Lorikeets consist of a commercially prepared formula. Some of these may be fed dry or moistened; others need to be made into a solution and fed as a nectar. The nectar will need to be replaced several times daily; every 4 hours in hot weather.

The diet should also include some fruits such as: apples, pomegranates, papaya, grapes, cantaloupe, pineapple, figs, and kiwi. Pollen, corn-on-the-cob and some flowers such as pansies, nasturtiums, roses, hibiscus, marigolds, and dandelions may be offered, as well.

Foods to Avoid

Some foods are on the do-not-feed list. These include foods that contain high amounts of sugar or fats (junk foods: potato chips, doughnuts, etc.), avocado (guacamole), chocolate, alcohol, or caffeine. Do not give fruit pits. Persimmons are also on the do-not-feed list.

Grit

While not a food, grit is something people think all birds need. They don't. If it is overeaten, grit impaction can occur in the digestive system. Finches and canaries may benefit from a couple of grains of grit every couple of months, but most budgies, cockatiels, and other parrots do not need it.

Feeding times

Natural feeding times in wild birds are about a half hour after sunrise and again at 5-6 PM. Sticking close to these feeding times will be most natural for the companion bird. Larger breeds can have fruits or vegetables left in the cage through the day for snacking and entertainment. Smaller breeds will typically have food left in the cage throughout the day. The smaller birds need to eat more frequently throughout the day due to their higher metabolic rate and energy need.

Monitoring intake

You should offer your bird only what he can eat in a day. This will make it easier to monitor his daily intake. Decreased food intake may be the first sign that a bird is ill.

Hygiene

Dishes should be washed daily in hot soapy water. No food should stay in the cage for longer than 24 hours as the risk of fecal contamination or spoiling is high.

Water

Fresh, clean water should always be available. If a water bottle is used, the water should be changed daily and the tip should be checked daily to be sure it is working. Dehydration is a serious problem that can occur within a day or two if water is unavailable.

Conclusion

No matter what bird comes into your home, read and ask questions regarding its specific nutritional needs. Feeding a balanced, varied diet will play a major role in helping your pet bird live a long and healthy life.

Related Articles:

Bird Nutrition: Feeding Pet Birds, Parrot Diets, and Nutrition Recommendations
How to Switch Your Bird's Diet: Slow and Steady

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