

## **CARING FOR YOUR PET BIRD**

By Hilary Stern, DVM

For The Birds

1136 South De Anza Blvd, Suite B.

San Jose, CA 95129

<http://www.forthebirdsdvm.com>

### **Diet: Seeds vs. pellets**

Seed diets are nutritionally inadequate for birds. Seed diets are high in fat and low in the vitamins, minerals, and protein that birds need to stay healthy. While birds can survive temporarily on seed diets, in time chronic malnutrition will compromise their immune systems, and they will get sick.

Pelleted diets are specifically formulated to meet the nutritional needs of your bird. They contain the right balance of vitamins, minerals, protein, carbohydrates, and fats that your bird requires for optimal health. There are a number of different pellets available at your local pet store or veterinary clinic. It is best to avoid pellets that are brightly colored, and opt for the pellets that do not contain food coloring. Ask your veterinarian which type of pellets is best for your bird.

### **Table foods**

Some birds like to eat table foods in addition to their pellets. It is okay to feed most healthy low-fat, low-salt items to your bird. Fruits and vegetables high in vitamin A are particularly important for parrots. Foods that are toxic to your bird and must be avoided include chocolate, alcohol, caffeine, avocado, and highly salted foods. It is important to wash fruits and vegetables carefully before feeding them to your bird. While table foods can add interest and diversion at meal times, they should not compromise more than 20 per cent of your bird's diet.

### **Water**

It is important that your bird have access to clean water at all times. Water dishes need to be washed daily with soap; just rinsing out dishes with water is not adequate to remove colonized bacteria. Do not use tubes or water bottles, as they are difficult to clean thoroughly. Do not put vitamins, supplements, or juice in your bird's water, as this encourages bacterial growth.

### **Housing: Cages**

In general, we recommend providing your bird with the largest cage you can afford and have space for. Powder-coated and stainless steel cages are the safest for birds. Galvanized wire cages, which are coated with zinc, can make your bird sick. Ask your veterinarian which cage manufacturer he or she recommends.

### **Perches**

Wooden dowel perches of unvarying diameter can create painful worn spots on the bottom of your bird's feet. Natural branch or perches of varying diameter are best.

### **Keeping your bird's environment clean**

It is important for your bird's health to keep his environment clean. Water dishes should be washed daily with soap and hot water.. The cage papers should be changed daily and the bottom of the cage should be washed thoroughly with soap as needed to remove all debris, rinsed thoroughly, then disinfected. A convenient disinfectant is a 1:32 dilution of bleach and water. Make sure to thoroughly rinse away all traces of disinfectant before you return your bird to his cage.

## **Bathing your bird**

Birds are made for wind and rain. Regular baths or showers are important for the health of your bird's feathers, skin, and sinuses. Some birds prefer baths, others prefer misting, and others prefer taking showers with their owners. Experiment with your bird, and find a solution that fits both your needs. Birds should be bathed or showered a minimum of three times a week, even in the winter months. Species such as cockatoos, cockatiels and African greys, who are very dusty birds, benefit from daily bathing.

## **What not to buy, or, 'pet store perils'**

Unfortunately, there is no regulatory agency overseeing products sold for pet birds. As a consequence, there are a number of items commonly sold in pet stores that can be harmful to your bird. We often see problems associated with sandpaper perches, grit, walnut shell or corncob bedding, and mite protectors. Sandpaper perch covers wear the skin off the bottom of birds' feet and create painful sores. Grit is unnecessary for parrots and can cause digestive problems. Mite protectors release toxins into your bird's environment and (despite their name) are ineffective against mites. Walnut shell and corncob bedding can grow bacteria and fungi that make your bird sick. When in doubt, ask your veterinarian before you purchase a new item.

## **Making Your Home "Bird Safe"**

Many things in a human household can be dangerous to your bird. Just as you must "child-proof" your home if you have a small child, it is important to make sure your home is "bird-proof" when you have a feathered companion.

## **Clipping your bird's wings**

Trauma is one of the most common causes of death in companion birds. A flighted bird can fly into a window or a mirror, out a door or window, into the toilet or a pot of boiling water, or into a ceiling fan. If your bird spends time out of its cage, we strongly recommend keeping his wings clipped. Trimming feathers hurts no more than a hair cut, and the clipped feathers will be replaced during the next molt cycle.

## **Avoid lead poisoning and the ingestion of non-food items**

Just like small children, birds like to put everything in their mouths. If given the chance, birds can swallow toxic items. One of the most commonly ingested household toxins is lead. Sources of lead in the home include solder on lampshades or stereo equipment, old paint or paint on items from less developed countries (e.g. cages from Mexico), chipped ceramic items, linoleum, putty, costume jewelry, mini blinds, curtains weights, fishing sinkers, foil from the top of wine bottles, and stained or leaded glass. Lead toxicity can cause incoordination, seizures, anemia, and kidney damage. If you think your bird has ingested a lead item, take him to an avian veterinarian immediately.

## **Protect your bird from airborne toxins**

Birds have a much more sensitive respiratory system than do humans. Certain airborne toxins that are relatively safe for humans can cause illness or even death in our feathered friends. Non-stick surfaces, such as those found on Teflon-coated cookware, drip pans, irons, and self-cleaning ovens, can emit fumes (often odorless) if allowed to over heat. Other sources of toxic fumes include spray pesticides, wet paints, rug cleaners, wood smoke, air fresheners, incense, scented candles, hair spray, perfume, hot-oil frying, cleaning products, and burning plastic. Cigarette smoke is also very toxic to birds. In general, any material that gives off strong fumes are

a potential hazard to you pet. If you smell something strong, always move your bird to a well-ventilated area and then investigate the source.

### **Supervise your bird with children and pets**

It is important to keep your bird away from cats, dogs, larger birds and other potentially harmful animals. Small children can also inadvertently hurt your bird, and child-bird interactions should be closely supervised.

### **Provide your bird with safe toys**

Safe toys add to your bird's quality of life by being a good source of fun and exercise. Some toys, however, can be hazardous. Avoid shiny metal toys that are not stainless steel; the zinc coating on these toys can make your bird sick. Plastic toys that your bird is able to chew up and swallow should be avoided. Hard plastic toys, like those made of acrylic, are safe. Wood and natural rope toys are ideal because they satisfy your bird's needs to play as well as his need to chew.

### **Veterinary Care**

Signs of sickness in birds can be subtle. A few common signs include reduced appetite and activity level, sitting fluffed and sleeping more than usual, sneezing, yawning, regurgitating food, or having diarrhea. When in doubt as to whether your bird needs medical attention, call your avian veterinary clinic for advice.

Just as with dogs and cats, we recommend a yearly physical examination for your bird. During this examination your veterinarian may want to take a blood sample, perform a culture, or examine your bird's feces. These tests provide valuable information regarding the health of your bird. If you are interested, you may also want to have your bird micro-chipped for identification purposes, or tested to see if it is male or female.