

# FEEDING BIRDS

## INTRODUCTION

A healthy diet is vital to the health and well-being of your bird. For this reason, your veterinarian will spend considerable time during your initial exam and consultation obtaining information about the diet and supplements you provide to your bird, and what your bird actually eats. Your vet may spend a good deal of time advising you how to feed a healthy, well-balanced diet for your bird. In general, most veterinarians recommend a diet for parrots consisting predominantly of a high quality formulated diet (usually pellets) along with healthy vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and a limited quantity of seeds, nuts and other foods.



## Formulated Diets

Formulated diets for birds are most often provided in a pelleted form. Pellets are available in a variety of sizes, shapes, textures, colors, and flavors. Pellets are precisely formulated to include essential nutrients such as protein, carbohydrates, vitamins, and minerals in known quantities based on our current understanding of companion bird nutrition. Pellets are convenient to offer to birds and are far more nutritionally balanced than commercially prepared seed and nut mixes. However, pellets are often less palatable than seeds and nuts, and may not be recognized as food to a bird, particularly if the bird has been fed a seed and nut predominant or exclusive diet for some time.

## Dietary Conversion

Conversion to a healthier diet that includes formulated diets must be done with great care and observation. A safe and appropriate dietary conversion plan for your bird can be developed with your veterinarian. You may be asked to weigh your bird periodically during a dietary conversion, either at home or in the veterinary office. You can learn more about how to weigh your bird in AAV's companion handout, "Digital Scales."

## Vegetables, Fruits and Whole Grains

Dark green leafy vegetables (eg. broccoli, kale, spinach) and red-orange vegetables (eg. sweet potatoes, carrots) are high in essential nutrients such as beta carotene, a precursor to vitamin A, an essential vitamin lacking in seeds and nuts. Vegetables are also high in fiber and water. Fruits, especially berries, are rich in fiber, vitamins, and anti-oxidants. Whole grains are rich in fiber and other nutrients. Avoid bleached and processed grains such as white rice, bread, and pasta. Instead, offer whole grains such as brown and wild rice, whole grain bread, and vegetable or whole grain pasta. Perishable foods such as fresh fruits, vegetables, and cooked pasta should not be allowed to spoil in the bird's cage.



## Seeds and Nuts

Seeds and nuts are generally high in fat and energy and very low in essential nutrients such as vitamin A, calcium, and certain essential amino acids. Commercial seed and nut mixes often are sprayed with a vitamin mixture, but this spray rarely penetrates the shell. Seeds and nuts can be a small part of the diet of most parrots. Small slivers of healthier nuts such as almonds or walnuts or pieces of seeds can be used as an effective training reward for food-motivated birds and used in foraging puzzles and toys for enrichment. There is some evidence that feeding a primarily formulated diet to small companion birds, such as cockatiels and budgerigars, can lead to kidney disease. Thus, for these small granivores, a larger portion of the diet can consist of high-quality seeds.



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## Fresh Water

Fresh water must be provided at all times. Water can be offered in bowls or in bottles. While drinking water stays cleaner when offered in a bottle, water bottles must be thoroughly cleaned periodically and closely monitored to make sure they are working properly. Offering two or more water bottles reduces the chances of water deprivation if one bottle fails to work properly.

## Behavioral Enrichment

A healthy and varied diet promotes more than just physical health and well-being, but also serves to provide enrichment and mental stimulation to your bird. Healthy food snacks can be used as training rewards for food-motivated birds, and can be used in foraging puzzles and toys for mental challenge.

Foraging is a natural behavior performed by animals, including birds, as they search for (dig, scratch, chew, shred) and manipulate their food items. Encouraging foraging behaviors at home offers a great opportunity for parrots to display their normal behavioral repertoire; in addition, it helps to prevent and treat problem behaviors, thereby enriching and improving the welfare of our feathered companions. Foraging also has the added benefits of increasing activity, providing great mental stimulation and alleviating stress and boredom.

You can learn more about how to introduce foraging to your bird by reading AAV's handout on "Foraging for Parrots."

## Grit

Birds lack teeth, and so food items are swallowed in small pieces and ground up by the ventriculus, the heavily muscled second chamber of the avian stomach. The ventriculus often holds on to a few particles of insoluble material, such as pebbles or soluble grit, to help with the grinding of food. Grit is generally not recommended for most parrots. Grit in the form of ground oyster shell is often recommended for canaries, finches, pigeons and doves.

## Other Supplements

Cuttlebones can be offered to small birds and are often relished by reproductively active female birds as a source of calcium for the production of eggs. Mineral blocks can serve the same purpose in larger parrots. Salt blocks should not be offered to birds. Vitamin supplements are not considered necessary for birds on a healthy diet, but may be recommended for birds that are having difficulty converting to a healthier diet or have evidence of nutritional deficiency based on exam or diagnostic findings by your veterinarian.

## Feeding Tips

- Carefully monitor TOTAL food consumption during any diet change.
- Introduce small amounts of a new food at a time.
- Gradually reduce the total volume of seeds as you increase the volume of more nutritional foods.
- Clean all food and water cups and remove old food from the cage daily.
- Do not provide supplemental vitamins unless recommended by your avian veterinarian.

## Foods to Avoid

- Avocados: Although healthy for humans, these fruits contain glycosides which can be dangerous for birds.
- Chocolate: Chocolate contains a stimulant called theobromine. If overdosed, this can result in hyperactivity or even convulsions.
- Fatty, salty, or sugary foods: These foods, like in humans, can result in a variety of health problems, such as obesity and chronic liver disease. In birds, it is very easy to underestimate how much is being consumed.
- Alcoholic beverages: The small size of birds makes intoxication very easily accomplished and very dangerous.

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## Specialized Diets

Some parrot species have specialized dietary requirements. For example, lorries and lorikeets are nectar eaters in the wild and are often fed specially formulated liquid diets or mashes that are low in iron. Other species such as toucans, toucanets, and mynahs also require low iron diets. Commercially available diets are also available for waterfowl, backyard poultry, and pigeons, as well as others. Consult with your veterinarian for further information regarding specialized diets for these species.

## Finding an Avian Veterinarian

There are several good ways to find an avian veterinarian near you. A comprehensive list of avian veterinarians can be found on the AAV website; visit [www.aav.org](http://www.aav.org), then click on "Find a Vet." Other bird owners as well as local bird stores and clubs can also be good sources of information.

## AAV: Setting a Standard in Avian Care Since 1980

Avian medicine is a distinct and very specialized field that requires extensive training, advanced skills, and facilities specifically designed and equipped to treat and hospitalize birds. The Association of Avian Veterinarians was established to provide veterinarians with this special education, and to keep them up to date with the latest information on bird health. The AAV holds an annual conference on avian medicine and publishes the peer-reviewed *Journal of Avian Medicine and Surgery*. AAV also makes annual contributions toward avian conservation and sponsors studies advancing the understanding of avian medicine.



## For More Information

For more information on birds, ask your veterinarian for copies of the following AAV Client Education Brochures:

- Avian Chlamydiosis and Psittacosis
- Veterinary Care for Your Pet Bird\*
- Basic Care for Companion Birds\*
- Behavior: Normal and Abnormal
- Caring for Backyard Chickens
- Digital Scales
- Feather Loss
- Feeding Birds
- Injury Prevention and Emergency Care
- Managing Chronic Egg-laying in Your Pet Bird
- Signs of Illness in Companion Birds\*
- Ultraviolet Lighting for Companion Birds
- When Should I Take My Bird to a Veterinarian?\*
- Zoonotic Diseases in Backyard Poultry\*

*\*Available in multiple languages. All others are available in English only at this time.*

## Online Resources

Follow AAV on Facebook ([www.facebook.com/aavonline](https://www.facebook.com/aavonline)) for great tips and the latest news for pet bird owners. You can also find us on Twitter (@aavonline) and YouTube!

Our website, [www.aav.org](http://www.aav.org), offers a Find-a-Vet tool to help pet bird owners locate avian veterinarians around the world. We also offer a variety of resources such as basic bird care instructions and more. Visit the website today!



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