



PELLETS: HOW AND WHY?

Traditionally pet birds have been fed seed diets, but very few of our companion avian species are exclusive seedeaters in the wild. Seeds eaten in the wild are very different to those available commercially: there is a wider variety; they are fresh; they may have germinated; they may have dirt stuck to them; they may contain insects. Seed available commercially cannot form a balanced diet, and is at the root of much of the nutrition related disease seen in companion avian species. We do not yet know the precise nutritional requirements of companion avian species, but we know much more than we did twenty, even ten, years ago. Like avian medicine, the field of avian nutrition is growing quickly.

SUBTLE SIGNS OF MALNUTRITION

Poor body condition:

- Underweight or overweight
- Screaming, aggressiveness, biting, reduced playfulness or lethargy
- Poor feathering which are delayed or continuous molts, discolored feathers, stress bars on the feathers
- Dry or flaky skin, nails, beaks and feet
- Overgrown beaks and nails
- Smooth pink spots on the undersides of feet
- Diarrhea
- Increased incidence of low-grade disease or infection
- Reduced fertility in breeding birds

More severe signs of malnutrition:

- Obesity
- Atherosclerosis
- Feather destructive or feather picking behavior
- Vitamin A deficiency leading to an increased incidence of respiratory tract disease and kidney disease
- Calcium deficiency leading to osteoporosis, broken bones, seizures and reproductive disease, such as egg binding
- Fatty liver degeneration
- Shortened life expectancy

Note: These are not exhaustive lists of the signs and effects of malnutrition, neither are the above signs of disease necessarily explained only by nutritional problems. Please consult your avian veterinarian if you are concerned.



WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT SEED

All seed is high in fat and low in vitamins A, C, E, biotin and folic acid, among others. Seed does not contain adequate minerals, and is especially low in calcium, selenium and iron. Seed contains very little fiber or protein. The protein present in seed is mostly of poor quality. Seed lacks Omega 3 fatty acids. Sunflower seeds are among the worst culprits.

Seeds do not contain the pigment nutrients required for some feather colors.

Mould growth is common in seed, particularly in peanuts. Even if the mould is not visible, the toxins produced can compromise a bird's health over the short or long term. In most cases, we have no idea where, when, by whom or with what pesticides the seed we feed our birds was grown.

“Vitaminized” and “supplemented” seed does little, if any good, as birds (other than pigeons and chickens) husk their seed, discarding any vitamin or mineral coating. Many vitamins degrade with time and with exposure to light. The value of any coating is questionable at best.

A vitamin/mineral powder or liquid added to the drinking water will support bacterial growth in the water dish.

Vitamins and minerals must be consumed in the correct amounts and proportions. This cannot be controlled or properly assessed in a seed based diet, supplemented with a vitamin/mineral product: deficiencies or excess can still occur.

Fruits, vegetables and human food added to a seed diet will replace some of what is missing, but all too often, these are diets lacking in some important nutrients. Usually overall calcium and vitamin A content is still low and fat is still high. Some of the fats present in seed will affect calcium absorption, further reducing its availability to the bird. When birds are offered a homemade diet, even if the non-seed component is healthy, we must pay strict attention to what the bird actually eats, rather than to what he is offered. Birds will pick out the bits they like.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT PELLETS

Pellets are more expensive than an all seed diet; veterinary bills are less for birds not suffering from poor nutrition. Malnutrition is at the root of the majority of problems seen by avian veterinarians. Pellets are less messy and time consuming to prepare than seed and homemade diets. Birds can exist for many years on a less than optimal diet. Birds on a balanced diet are less likely to become ill, and if they do, are more likely to recover successfully if not also suffering from malnutrition and the resulting damage to the liver, kidneys, lungs and other organs.

The goal is to feed 80-90% pellets. A bird on a pellet diet does not require additional vitamin or mineral supplementation.



Not all pellets are created equal. Some contain preservatives; coloring or have "fruity" smells added. These are for the owner. Birds have a relatively poor sense of smell and different color perception compared to man.

Although all pellets are not equal, almost any pellet diet is better than a seed diet. We know the ingredients of pellets, and can make informed decisions about preservatives, coloring and flavoring. This may be particularly important in the case of a bird with a possible hypersensitivity or allergy.

Organic, pesticide free products without preservatives or coloring agents are available. The quality and the origin of the ingredients of a pellet can be controlled. Harrison's Bird Diet is alone in conducting quality control analysis of each batch of food at an independent laboratory.

Converting Your Bird To A Pellet Diet:

Many birds will happily accept pellets immediately, especially if they are used to a variety of foods. Try offering pellets, assuming that your bird will eat them.

Leave pellets in the cage all day, in the usual bowl. Offer fresh pellets daily. If necessary, mix pellets with what your bird already eats.

Don't be surprised if your bird sulks and throws his new diet at first. Do not allow this to become a game by rewarding him with a dramatic response, should he fling his dish in disgust. Talk to your bird about his food: there is a good chance that he will listen.

Feed your bird when the rest of the family eats. Birds are social creatures and will be more likely to eat if you are also eating or if they see another bird eating pellets.

You can demonstrate by trying the pellets yourself, in front of the bird. Birds must be taught that something is edible.

Different methods will be effective for a given owner or bird. You can try mixing the pellets with chopped or soft fruit, so that the pellets stick (this should not be left in the cage for more than half an hour, in order to prevent bacterial growth.)

Some birds and owners will make the change to pellets over days or weeks. This approach requires taking a few days to measure how much seed your bird eats: not the amount he is offered, but the amount he actually consumes. Measure the quantity of seed you place in the empty dish in the morning and measure what is left at night. Take the average over several days to account for waste. The volume of seed your bird consumes in the day is the starting point. If you choose to convert the



bird over (for example) 30 days, divide that daily amount by 30 and on day one, offer the bird 29/30 of his normal seed portion, and a bowl of pellets. On day two he is offered 28/30 of the full amount, and a bowl of pellets. Pellets can be fed in a separate bowl, or on top of the seed, so that the bird must pick through the pellets to reach the seed.

Concentrate your efforts in the morning and in the evening, when it is most natural for a bird to eat. If necessary, offer pellets all day and seed for a short time in the morning and in the evening. Reduce or eliminate the morning feed, if you have to, but send your bird to bed with a full crop.

Restrict treats to healthy, nutrient dense foods, such as cooked squash or sweet potato, carrot, leafy greens, papaya and mango. Foods that are high in calories, sugar or fat will satiate the bird, making him less likely to try something new.

Small birds may be more likely to convert if they are offered crushed pellets, or a brand that comes in the form of a mash or small pellet.

The presence of a mirror near the dish may suggest to a small bird that it is safe to examine or to eat the pellets, as the other bird appears to be doing so.

For small birds that might naturally forage on the ground, pellets may be scattered on a clean cage floor or mixed with millet, so that the bird is forced to pick through the pellets to find the millet. Gradually reduce the proportion of millet. This will not work in the case of most medium or large parrots, which may feel less secure on the ground and are more likely to eat from the highest bowl. Persist with confidence: nearly all healthy birds can be converted to a pellet diet.

MONITORING YOUR BIRD DURING A DIETARY CHANGE

Usually if your bird is grinding and chewing the pellets, he is consuming them. You must, however, monitor his droppings and weight to be sure. The fecal component of a bird's stool is usually dark brown or black on a seed diet. On pellets, it will usually be paler brown and a little more bulky. Much reduced or green feces or an increase in the volume of urine can indicate that the bird is not eating the pellets adequately.

Birds cannot be forced in to eating what we choose for them. Especially in the case of smaller birds, they may fail to recognize something new as food, or refuse it for some other reason. They can starve if not monitored closely.



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Purchase a gram scale and weigh your bird at the same time every morning to establish what is normal. You should know, when you begin your bird's conversion to pellets, what his weight is, what his target weight is, and how quickly he should reach it. Through lack of exercise and poor diet, obesity and poor muscle tone are common among pet birds. Birds are natural athletes and exercise is clearly an important component of weight loss. Discuss this with your avian veterinarian. Once birds on poor diets begin to eat better and once they begin to lose weight, they will want to exercise. Birds that are underweight or ill should not be converted to a pellet diet until stabilized. Such birds should be under the care of an avian veterinarian. Pellets may be offered alongside the bird's usual diet, but conversion will occur safely and more easily when a bird feels well.

Birds that are ill may be reluctant to convert to pellets. These are often cases of undiagnosed, chronic (that is, longstanding) or subclinical (that is, not showing obvious signs) disease. Just like humans, when unwell, birds may not want to try new things; once healthy, even the most hardened seedeaters can usually be converted. Start with a visit to your avian veterinarian to ensure that your bird is fit to change his diet.