

Pet Bird Diet Components

An in-depth look at the components of a healthy pet bird diet

By Nikki Moustaki

Pet birds require a balanced diet of different food components.

There's a notion about parrots being difficult to feed – they're fussy and consume so little that it's nearly impossible to give them the proper nutrition they require. Sure, that might be true for some parrots, but for every picky Polly there's a Fatty Feathers that will gobble down everything. Whether your bird is a true gourmand or a dainty eater, it's important to feed it the best possible diet.

"A lot of research has been done in the past 30 years on avian diets," said Kathleen Lance, owner of Bird Paradise in Burlington, New Jersey. "We have learned that birds require the same food elements as other animals – proteins, fats, carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals and water. There is also a psychological component to the eating habits of birds, factors such as color, texture, taste, shape and size. The key word is balance."

Pet Bird Diet Component – Seed-Based Diet

Seeds are a plant's way of making new plants, so when seeds are fresh or sprouting, they're filled with nutrients. Dried seeds don't offer a complete diet, and birds fed dried seed exclusively will begin to demonstrate health issues in just a few years.

Some birds, like the Australian grass parakeets, budgies (parakeets) and cockatiels can tolerate a diet higher in percentage of seeds than another species of bird whose wild diet includes a very low proportion of seeds. Still, a seed-only diet leads to problems.

Seeds have gotten a bad rap in the past few years, leading some birdkeepers to exclude them from the diet. Eliminating seeds from a bird's diet because they lack some nutrients is like excluding any one item from your diet because it doesn't offer total nutrition. You never hear anyone say, "I'm not going to eat French fries because they lack some of the important nutrients I need." Rather, French fries are a yummy side dish to that burger and milkshake – you want to include some goodies in a diet with other nutrient rich foods in order to get the vitamins and minerals you require.

"A fresh seed mix provides essential fatty acids for birds," said Kreig Peterson of Gourmet Pet Supply in Albuquerque, New Mexico. "Seeds are very important for birds because fatty acids are rendered useless, even toxic, once they are exposed to light and air. The seed hull acts as a natural barrier for the fatty acids and prevents their degradation."

Pet Bird Diet Component – Pelleted Diet

A pelleted form of bird food has been around since about the late 1960s, but became popular in the 1980s and have remained an easy-to-feed base diet ever since. Ingredients in the many brands of pellets vary, but the basic idea is that the pellets are a "whole food" and can be fed in exclusivity. After some years of use, pellets are still being improved upon to meet specific species' needs. Many pet bird owners now feed their birds a base diet of pellets with other fresh foods and seeds to round out the diet.

The trick to pellets is the "change over," making sure that your bird is actually eating them. Many birds will starve themselves to death rather than eat something new. So, add the pellets gradually to your bird's previous base diet and watch to see that the bird is actually consuming the pellets.

"If your bird drops more than 10 percent of its body weight, re-examine your conversion technique and try another method," said Lance. "Also, monitor the bird's mood, condition and droppings. A decrease of more than 20 percent in the number of droppings may also be a sign to try another technique. A very dark green or black stool can mean the bird is not eating. Be sure to consult an avian veterinarian if you feel the bird is responding to the change in any negative way."

Pet Bird Diet Component – Fruits & Veggies

Fresh fruits and veggies are not only a great source of vitamins and minerals, they also add a fun component to your bird's diet. Offer an abundance of fruits and veggies every day – whole, chopped, grated, chunked, cooked and sliced.

Give your bird a lot of options. Choose dark green or orange fruits and veggies for a boost in vitamin A. Smart choices include: kale, carrots, squash (cooked), cooked sweet potatoes, spinach, apples, jalapeno peppers, soybeans, green

beans, oranges, peaches, pears and plums. Remove any fresh foods after a few hours so that your bird doesn't snack on anything that has spoiled.