

Share With Your Bird: Mealtime Tips

You can share a snack with your parrot if you're eating healthy foods

By Rebecca Sweat

Share bird-sized portions of healthy foods with your bird at mealtime. Courtesy Mike Allison, Pennsylvania

You don't have to go out and buy special foods to cook up for your pet. Just give it a little of your own meals — as long as what you're eating is healthy.

"Make your bird a plate containing two or three bird-sized bites of each of the foods on the menu," suggested Julie Burge, DVM, a veterinarian and aviculturist in Missouri. For instance, a tiny portion of baked chicken, a spoonful of corn, some lettuce and other vegetables from the salad, a portion torn off of your roll, and a little bit of apple pie.

"If your bird is suffering from obesity or high cholesterol, skip the meat and pie, and give it fresh apple slices and oatmeal instead. If you are eating something your bird shouldn't have, like sushi, chocolate chip cookies or guacamole, offer a substitute that looks similar but is safe," Dr. Burge advised.

One of the easiest ways to incorporate "people food" into your bird's diet is to give it some of your breakfast in the morning, and then some of your dinner in the evening. "Only leave the fresh table food in the cage for an hour or so and then remove it. If you leave it in the cage any longer, you can get bacterial overgrowth," warned California veterinarian, Tia Greenberg, DVM. During the daytime, your bird would just have its pelleted base diet and water in its cage.

There are some additional tips to keep in mind when dishing out meals to your bird. First, birds don't need the extra fats or salt, so wait and add the salt, salad dressings, butter and cheese sauce to your meat and vegetables until after you've dished out your bird's portions. Before serving any cooked foods to your bird, let it cool down to just slightly warm or lukewarm, so that the food does not burn your bird's mouth.

Make sure your bird has its own dish, rather than let it eat off your plate or nibble on the same food you're eating. "Never give your bird anything that has your germs on it," Dr. Burge warned. "Humans normally carry a lot of bacteria that is foreign to a bird's system, and will make the bird sick. I don't care how many years the bird has been eating off someone's plate or out of their mouth, sooner or later it is going to cause a bad infection."

Last but not least, be sure the portions you give are bird-sized. This has already been mentioned in the article and cannot be overstated. "It's important to think about how much bigger you are than your birds, and to give them proportions of food in an amount that is right for their body size," said Gregory Harrison, DVM, an avian veterinarian in Florida.

Dr. Harrison has seen single-kept budgies and canaries with an entire flower of broccoli or a large handful of grapes hanging in their cage, which is way too much for one bird to eat.

"If the bird ate the entire flower of broccoli he was given — or even just most of it — the bird would not have room left in his body to eat his base diet and over time, if he kept eating this way, he could suffer from fatty acid deficiencies because there's no fat in the vegetables," he said. Giving just one grape to a cockatiel is the equivalent of a human eating 300 to 400 grapes. Offering a teaspoon of pasta to a cockatiel would be like a person consuming a whole quart of pasta for a snack.

How can you know if the portions you're serving up are too large? "If, after serving up some pasta to your bird, it still eats some of its pelleted diet, then the portion you're giving is probably just right," said Jeffrey Jenkins, DVM, an avian veterinarian in Southern California. If your bird eats nothing but pasta, that's a problem.

The bottomline, said Don Harris, DVM, an avian veterinarian in Miami, Florida, is to "keep your bird's portions proportionate to its size, strive for a reasonably balanced diet, offer a variety of foods, and don't give your bird a lot of foods you shouldn't be eating yourself."

The truth is, we should be feeding our birds the same way we feed ourselves — not a lot of fat or sugar, and a balanced mix of all the food groups. Realistically, though, many of us do not eat a healthy diet like we should. We get into a habit of eating a lot of processed or fast food, or scarfing down a lot of junk food to comfort ourselves after a busy day.

In Brian Speer's, DVM, an avian veterinarian in Oakley, California, and co-author of *Birds for Dummies* (IDG Books, 1999), experience, it's often people's pet birds that motivate them to start eating right. "A lot of people do not become interested in nutrition for themselves until they learn about how diet impacts their bird's health," he said. But, when they finally do get interested in nutrition, "they really make it a priority and that's really neat, because if you're seeking to feed your bird healthy foods and you're sharing meals together, chances are, your own diet will improve as well." And that's a win-win situation for both you and your bird.