

## Feed Table Foods To Pet Birds In Moderation

**If your pet bird must have a taste, some foods should only be offered in small amounts.**

*By Rebecca Sweat*

By Cioli & Hunnicutt/Bowtie Studio/Courtesy Omar's Exotic Birds  
If your pet bird must have a taste of junk foods, offer it a small amount.

You should talk to your avian veterinarian if you have questions about dietary health issues for your bird's species. There are, however, some generalities that apply to all parrots. What follows is a list of table foods that should be offered occasionally or in small amounts.

This category of table foods should only be given very occasionally to your pet bird, if at all. Tops on this list is "junk foods," such as potato chips, tortilla chips, salty crackers, cheese curls and French fries, as well as sweets such as cookies, cake, donuts, muffins and other baked goodies. These foods are all high in saturated fat, in addition to being high in sugar or salt (depending on whether it's a savory or sweet snack), and have little or no nutritional value.

High-fat foods can contribute to obesity and high cholesterol, and in time, can cause life-threatening problems such as hepatic lipidosis (fatty liver disease), atherosclerosis, strokes, and heart disease. Sugary foods can add to the obesity problem as well, especially if the bird isn't getting much exercise. Too many high-salt foods can cause dehydration, pulmonary edema, brain congestion, kidney failure, enteritis, and high-blood pressure.

What if you cannot resist giving your parrot some potato chips or cookies? It's okay to give your bird a taste "every now and then," said Missouri veterinarian and aviculturist, Julie Burge, DVM, but it needs to be "in reasonable quantities, and with regard to your bird's health status. Let your lean-and-healthy macaw have a whole French fry, but give your conure a smaller piece, while your overweight Amazon will have to settle for a carrot stick." (Note: Remove salt from the fry.)

Junk food becomes a problem when birds eat it more than a couple times a week, or when they get portions that are too large for their body size. Brian Speer, DVM, an avian veterinarian in Oakley, California, and co-author of *Birds for Dummies* (IDG Books, 1999), brings the point home this way: "The average Amazon weighs 400 grams, but a man might weigh 170 pounds. As a percentage of body weight, it's going to take far less salty tortilla chips to create a salt toxicosis in the bird as compared to the human." If you do give your bird a salty chip, break off a tiny piece of one chip for him, rather than give an entire chip.

You should also be careful about giving your bird heavy, starchy foods like stuffing, mashed potatoes and gravy, tater tots, hash browns, cheeseburgers, macaroni and cheese, lasagna, and fettucini Alfredo. Granted, these foods do offer some nutritional value so they aren't "junk food," but they're very fattening and loaded in way too many calories for the average bird to eat a lot of.

"Really high calorically-dense foods are not good for birds because if they eat those they don't eat their pellets," said Jeffrey Jenkins, DVM, an avian veterinarian in Southern California. "Something like mashed potatoes and gravy is okay in small amounts, but birds shouldn't eat a whole lot of it because if you give them too much they're going to fill up on the potatoes and then they don't eat enough of their pellets. If they did that every day they're not going to get a well-balanced diet."

Dairy products should also be limited. "Birds do not have lactase, the enzyme which helps digest lactose," said Natalie Antinoff DVM, an exotics-only veterinarian in Houston, Texas. Many people like to give their birds cheese or human cereal with milk poured on it, but in time, milk consumption can cause severe allergic reactions in pet birds as well as severe diarrhea and inflammation of the gastrointestinal tract system — either of which can be life threatening. It's best to avoid giving dairy products to your bird. If you insist on giving milk or cheese, make it only a small taste and only a couple of times a month at the most.

There's also some specific issues with cheese. Most types of cheese exceed 85 percent fat, and do not provide a lot of protein or other nutrients. Mozzarella cheese in particular has a lot of gum in it and is very rubbery, which can form into a big mass in a bird's crop or gastrointestinal tract and cause a blockage. Dr. Nemetz has had to surgically remove wads of mozzarella cheese from birds' crops. "Usually it happens after the owners have had pizza and they let their bird go get hold of some and the next day the bird is throwing up," he said. If you give your bird pizza, it's best to remove the cheese on the piece you give to him.

Since many birds develop high cholesterol problems, Dr. Burge advises bird owners to restrict the amount of egg yolks and red meat, which could contribute to cholesterol increases. She recalled a case of a couple who fed their Amazon sausage, bacon and eggs almost every morning. "The bird had a cholesterol level so high that the laboratory could not measure it due to the high-fat content in the blood causing the machines to malfunction," she said. There's also the additional concern with beef and pork in that they have a high phosphorus content and can cause or exacerbate calcium deficiencies in a bird's body.

Tofu, too, can be a problem for birds. "In some species, it can cause gastrointestinal problems like cheese does," said Larry Nemetz, DVM, an exotics-only veterinarian in Southern California. Also, because tofu is high in protein, it can be hard on a bird's kidneys.

The last type of food in this category of restricted table foods is fruit. That's a bit controversial, Dr. Speers admitted, because in a lot of people's minds, "they put fruit in the same category as vegetables. But in general, fruits are lower priority than vegetables. Fruit is high in sugar and when you give it to your bird, it gets more energy than it should have, and it can become hyper. Also, fruit is kind of empty as far as nutritional value overall compared to vegetables."

Don Harris, DVM, an avian veterinarian in Miami, Florida, agreed and added: "Fruit is probably the biggest misdirection of a bird's diet, other than the standard seed diets. The only thing worse than an all-seed diet is a seed-and-fruit diet, because now you're feeding the fat and you're driving it into the cells with sugar." He suggests that at the most, you only give your bird a small piece a couple of times a week. "The portion you give shouldn't exceed the size of the bird's head," Dr. Harris said. Any more than that is going to be too big of a piece.