

What Is Good Bird Nutrition?

Why is poor nutrition one of biggest caused of avian disease and how should you feed your pet bird?

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Courtesy Toni Ortiz, California

Avian nutrition is a work in progress. It can take years to gauge the effects of a certain food or nutrient on a parrot's long-term health and viability.

Most avian veterinarians believe that poor nutrition is the most prevalent health problem they see in pet birds. Poor nutrition results in lowered resistance to disease and a host of health issues, such as atherosclerosis, obesity, rickets, lack of fertility, poor feathering, liver disease and other serious conditions.

Exotic birds offered for sale in the United States are domestically bred, and, in many cases, hand-raised. When bird breeders feed their birds a variety of foods from weaning on up, the youngsters usually will sample new foods. As they mature, pet birds develop opinions and specific tastes. When their owners indulge their preferences, finicky appetites and bad eating habits often result.

There's a lot of confusion about what comprises the ideal avian diet. Bird breeders, writers, pet shop professionals, birdkeepers, researchers and avian veterinarians all have strong opinions about proper pet bird nutrition. Some advocate seed diets supplemented with fresh foods. Others recommend a mixture of seed, pellets and fresh fruit and vegetables. A diet consisting exclusively of pellets is yet another choice. Why all the confusion?

One reason is that exact nutritional requirements have not been established for every species, although exhaustive research by leading bird food companies has been helpful in establishing nutritional guidelines. Another reason is that new discoveries and research results are published on an ongoing basis. Avian nutrition is a work in progress. It can take years to gauge the effects of a certain food or nutrient on a parrot's long-term health and viability.

Fast Food For Pet Birds?

Humans can tolerate levels of bacterial contamination that birds cannot. A macaw developed Salmonella poisoning as a result of eating some soft, frozen yogurt. Another contracted E. coli from eating parts of a fast-food hamburger. It's difficult to know for sure that take-out or fast food is properly cooked and handled. You control the ingredients, cooking methods and sanitary conditions at home, so — for your bird's sake — feed it food you've prepared. (For further information contact: Food Safety and Inspection Service, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA); Washington, D.C. 20250-3700 or FSIS Food Safety Education Staff, Meat and Poultry Hotline: (800) 535-4555.)

Good Fruits & Vegetables For Pet Birds

* Dark green, leafy kale is rich in vitamin A and calcium. Clip some wet, freshly washed kale to your small pet bird's cage bars, and watch as your pet uses it for bathing, then for munching! Budgies, parrotlets, canaries and other small birds enjoy "leaf bathing."

* Broccoli contains calcium, vitamins A, K, B2 and C, and magnesium. Senegal parrots to macaw-sized birds enjoys holding stalks of raw broccoli in a foot and nibbling on the florets. Budgies and other small birds accept it readily when it's clipped securely to cage bars. Fresh broccoli is nearly odorless. Forgo broccoli with a strong, unpleasant odor.

* Try some beets! Cook beets whole, then cool, slide the skins off, chop into chunks, and serve to your birds. (Caution: Beets cause bright pink bird poop! Be careful where you serve beets — the red juice stains just about everything.)

* Apples are available in many varieties. Scrub thoroughly or remove the peel before offering apple chunks to your birds. Apple seeds are thought to be toxic to birds, so remove those, too.

* Citrus fruit can also be offered occasionally. Try small chunks of oranges, tangerines or grapefruit. Caique parrots especially seem to love grapefruit and other citrus fruit.

* Sweet potatoes are loaded with vitamin A and contain energy-giving carbohydrates, vitamin C, folate, calcium, dietary

fiber and potassium. Serve them to your pet bird cooked or raw. (Peel or scrub thoroughly first.) Introduce young birds to mashed sweet potatoes so they'll enjoy them all their lives! Even canaries love sweet potatoes. Discard sweet potatoes that have become moldy in the pantry, because cooking may not kill the spores.

* Sweet potatoes and yams are actually two different vegetables. Both are tubers, but the sweet potato is native to South America, and the yam hails from Africa. The important difference is that, according to USDA reports, only the true sweet potato contains Vitamin A.

* Pumpkin is also a good source of vitamin A. Birds will enjoy the seeds, fresh or roasted, as well as the cooked pumpkin itself.

* Brussels sprouts contain vitamin E, vitamin B6, vitamin C and folic acid. Feed them to your bird cooked or raw.

* Cauliflower is a source of biotin and pantothenic acid.

* Carrots are highly nutritious and readily available year-round. Cut them into sticks or chunks; offer them raw or cooked, and include the tops: small birds love bathing in the wet greens.

* Cook hard beans (kidney, navy, black, etc.), potatoes, beets and white potatoes prior to offering them to your pet bird. Boil corn on the cob briefly to reduce the risk of mold. Many birds enjoy cooked butternut or acorn squash and pumpkin. Cut these vitamin-A-rich vegetables into chunks, or serve them mashed, like potatoes.

* It isn't necessary to cook most vegetables, such as broccoli, peas, string beans, peppers, well-scrubbed sweet potatoes or leafy greens, but if your bird refuses raw produce, try cooking it. Add a few hot pepper flakes for flavor if you wish.

* Budgies and other small birds may refuse chopped produce served in a dish, but will eagerly gnaw on chunks of carrot, broccoli or corn on the cob and other fresh food when you fasten them firmly to the cage bars with clips. Special clips intended for this purpose are available in pet shops.

* Budgies, finches, canaries, parrotlets, Brotogeris and cockatiels may be tempted to bathe and dine when you fasten wet carrot tops, kale or collard greens to cage bars. Poke these delicacies down through the top of the cage, and get ready for a show!

* Larger birds may toss unwanted food out of their dishes or ignore it altogether. Try stringing fruit and vegetables on kabob-style rod feeders. Provide a variety of colors, textures and shapes to pique your bird's interest. [Peas, carrots, corn, lima beans, apple slices, papaya, mango, sweet red or green peppers, broccoli, cooked beets and sweet potatoes offer eye appeal, taste and nutrition.]

* Don't forget the water! Provide your bird with clean, fresh water every day.

In-House Dangers To Pet Birds

Do not use nonstick cookware or appliances where pet birds are present. Fumes emitted from overheating these products can kill birds quickly. Never use the self-cleaning cycle of an oven during the winter when your house is closed up or at any time during the year when your bird cannot be temporarily relocated. Your oven may contain nonstick or chemically treated components. Fumes from these, or smoke from burned-on food, can be deadly to birds.

Food & Vitamins For Pet Birds

A seed-only avian diet does not provide adequate nutrition and must be supplemented with various fresh foods and, often, prepared vitamin and mineral supplements. Choose a avian vitamin preparation that contains vitamin D3, which helps your bird absorb and utilize calcium. Sprinkle powdered supplements — according to package directions and your avian veterinarian's advice — on soft, fresh foods.

Formulated, pelleted bird diets go a long way toward providing complete nutrition, do not add vitamin supplements to these menus unless under instructions from your avian veterinarian. Overdosing your bird on vitamins can result in hypervitaminosis, which can be very serious.

Your pet bird also needs regular exposure to natural daylight and/or full-spectrum lighting indoors in order to properly synthesize vitamins.