

Table Food For Your Bird

We are what we eat and our birds like to eat what we eat too

By Rebecca Sweat

It's OK to give table food to your bird as long as it is nutritionally balanced and the ingredients aren't toxic.
Courtesy Pam Cichon, Florida

You're seated at the kitchen table, ready to take a bite of your spaghetti and meatballs when you hear a big "screeeeeeeech" from your parrot in his cage about 10 feet away. He gazes intently at the food you are about to put in your mouth. Then he crouches down on his perch and starts shaking his wings, which is his way of begging for a treat. You can tell he desperately wants a bite of your spaghetti, but should you?

"It's fine to give table food to your parrot — if the food is nutritionally balanced and none of the ingredients are toxic," said Brian Speer, DVM, an avian veterinarian in Oakley, California, and co-author of *Birds for Dummies* (IDG Books, 1999). In fact, most avian veterinarians actually encourage pet owners to share some of their meals with their parrots each day.

"None of the formulated diets have been absolutely proven to be 100 percent complete and balanced nutrition for any pet bird species," noted Missouri veterinarian and aviculturist, Julie Burge, DVM. There are around 350 psittacine species, and no one bird diet can perfectly meet the nutritional needs of all parrots, she said. A blue-and-gold macaw, for instance, may need a higher level of certain vitamins or minerals than a rose-breasted cockatoo, yet the two birds might be eating the same formulated food. Supplementing the diet with healthy table foods can help "balance out" a bird's diet and ensure its nutritional needs are being provided for, Dr. Burge said.

Table food can also offer a psychological benefit, added Don Harris, DVM, an avian veterinarian in Miami, Florida. "If you only feed your bird pellets, that can become really monotonous after a while," he said. "Parrots are intelligent creatures and need the intellectual stimulation of a varied diet." Not only are different foods enjoyable for birds to taste, foods with varied textures like broccoli, Swiss chard and string beans, are fun for parrots to shred and chew.

How much "people food" should be given to a pet bird each day? In general avian veterinarians recommend that 70 to 80 percent of a parrot's diet (by volume) be comprised of an extruded or pelletized formulated bird food, and the remaining 20 to 30 percent of a parrot's diet be made up of some seed, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, poultry and fish, and other healthy table foods. (This is a general diet, different species need different percentages.)

Ideally you should give your bird a "smorgasbord" of several different fresh or prepared foods each day, rather than a large quantity of just one or two foods, advised Larry Nemetz, DVM, an exotics-only veterinarian in Southern California. Offering a variety of foods is important, he said, so that you cover all the food groups. "Like people, birds need to eat some protein, carbohydrate, fats, and vitamins and minerals every day," Dr. Nemetz said.

With his own birds, on any one day he might give them some vegetables, which provide necessary vitamins and minerals, and then maybe some egg, chicken or beans as a protein source, some whole-wheat pasta or cooked brown rice to help meet their carbohydrates requirements, and then a tiny amount of a fat source, like some peanut butter or a nut.

You might need to provide a little more or less of certain food groups, depending on the species of bird that you own. For instance, "macaws to need a higher fat content in their diet, so they can be given more nuts and higher fat foods," Dr. Burge said. "On the other hand, a parrot prone to obesity, such as many Amazons or Quaker parrots, would benefit more from healthy, low-fat treats like vegetables. Eclectus parrots and Amazons need more vitamin A than other species, so carrots and sweet potatoes are good choices for them."