

Hand-Feeding Baby Birds

To hand-feed or not – an important question for those adopting baby birds, so learn more about hand-feeding baby birds.

By Peter S. Sakas, DVM

Some believe the bond between bird and owner is strengthened through hand-feeding, which consists of feeding formula by hand. A weaned baby bird — a bird capable of eating independently and no longer being fed formula by the breeder or regurgitated food by its parents — can still develop a strong bond even if the new owner does not actually do the hand-feeding.

If you are determined to hand-feed a bird, be prepared to make a commitment and learn the proper technique so the baby bird is never at risk. If done incorrectly, hand-feeding can cause great injury or death to the bird.

Is The Bird Weaned?

Occasionally, a young bird will be sold as newly weaned. However, when the bird is placed in a new environment, it may become apprehensive and revert back to “babyhood” — not eating on its own and preferring to be hand-fed. By monitoring the food intake of the new bird, you can ensure that it is receiving adequate amounts of nutrition.

Most avian veterinarians can cite instances where baby birds came into the hospital critically ill and emaciated because the bird was not eating enough on its own. These unfortunate birds often starved to death due to the inattention or inexperience of the bird's owner.

Sometimes a baby bird is not really eating and may just be playing with the food. If the bird eats seed, it may be cracking the hull and not swallowing the seed. A bird offered pellets may be pulverizing the pellet to powder but not actually eating it. The best means of monitoring food intake is by evaluating the droppings — what goes in has to come out. The droppings should have a substantial fecal portion. Check the bird's droppings at the breeder's facility or store before taking the bird home. Familiarize yourself with the normal appearance and number of droppings for the bird. A change in the number of droppings, or a change in the droppings' appearance, can indicate a problem.

If the droppings are all white or have scant fecal matter, the bird may not be eating enough. If this is the case, the bird may need to be hand-fed again until it begins to reliably eat on its own. Check with the breeder or your avian veterinarian for suggestions.

Purchase A Scale

A scale, one that weighs in grams as opposed to ounces, is one of the best purchases a bird owner can make. It is also a necessity to help monitor the health of a newly-purchased baby bird.

Baby birds should be weighed before feeding (when the crop is empty) each morning at the same time.

A slight, daily weight fluctuation is normal. (Ask your vet for acceptable fluctuation amounts.) However, a steady weight decline is a cause for concern. A decline while the bird is being weaned is normal, but a rapid drop could indicate that the bird is being weaned too quickly. Record these weights and trends.

Practice Makes Perfect

Hand-feeding must be done properly, because a mistake or carelessness can lead to the bird's injury, sickness or death. Practice hand-feeding the bird under the watchful eye of an expert before taking the bird home. Ideally, the expert will watch you prepare the food, check the food's temperature and feed the bird until you develop the necessary skills.

Feed the baby the same formula the bird was raised on (you can change it later, if you want) and offer the food at the same consistency the bird is used to. If you change the diet or consistency suddenly, the bird may refuse to eat. Food that is hotter or colder than the bird is accustomed to could also lead to refusal. Also if the food is too hot, you risk burning the crop. Check each syringe after it is drawn up to ensure it's not too hot. Avoid microwaving the formula, which often results in unevenly heated food.

Get direction from the breeder regarding positions and handling during the feeding process. If the bird's body is positioned

differently or your hand position is different than the bird is accustomed to, it may refuse to eat. Improper handling or accidental overfilling of the crop could result in the bird aspirating food into the trachea, lungs and air sacs. The bird could either die or develop aspiration pneumonia. [Most prospective pet bird owners should adopt an already weaned bird, unless one is interested in aviculture or has a hand-feeding mentor to carefully walk you through the process. — Eds]

The breeder or pet retailer should tell you how often the bird is being fed, what diet the bird is on and how much is given at each feeding. Also, get help putting together a reasonable plan so you have a protocol in place when it comes time to wean the baby.

Occasionally, when a bird is in a new environment, it becomes so stressed that even though it was eating on its own or doing well on one daily feeding, it may not be eating well enough to maintain condition. For example, if the bird was being fed 30cc (cubic centimeters) three times a day by the breeder, and, now that the bird is home, it is only taking in 10cc twice a day, this could be a potential problem, especially in young birds that are not yet eating anything on their own.

In a case such as this, the number of feedings may need to be increased, or the weaned bird might need to be hand-fed until it becomes adjusted to the new surroundings.

Get as much information as possible from the breeder or pet retailer regarding the bird's feeding schedule. Stay in contact with the breeder or retailer in case you have difficulties or concerns.