

## Outfitting Your Cockatiel

**Along with the essentials food and supplies, cockatiels need a variety of toys to keep them happy and engaged.**

*By Diane Grindol*

**The cockatiel cage:** Before your new cockatiel arrives home, you'll need to have some essentials on hand. Start with a bird cage. A cockatiel cage should be roomy, safe for your bird and easy to clean. The cage should measure at least 24-inches wide and 24-inches deep, although preferably bigger. Height is not as important as width, the bird needs room to move back and forth.

Choose a cage with bar spacing of about 12 an inch. Larger cages often have bar spacing of an inch or more, which is wide enough for a cockatiel to get its head stuck between the bars and become injured and/or suffocated. A large door will make it easier to move your cockatiel in and out of the cage.

**Cockatiel perches:** The cage should have at least three perches of varying shape, material and diameter. If the cage came with perches, you will need to replace one or two of them if they are the same. A cockatiel is never off its feet, so a variety of perches will keep its feet in better shape and prevent sores from developing. A rope-style perch often is the treasured sleep spot for cockatiels. Fresh natural branches — such as maple, oak, willow, eucalyptus or fruit wood (except cherry) — are appreciated, too. Cockatiels like to strip the bark, so you'll be replacing branches often, but it will entertain!

**Food and water dishes/bottles:** Most cages come with two dishes, one for water and one for food. A third or fourth dish allows you to offer dry food in one, vegetables in another and the occasional treat in the fourth. You may want to do away with the water dish and switch to a water bottle, because you'll find that most cockatiels love to hang out around their dishes and poop in them. Position the bottle above the water dish. Curious cockatiels will peck at the spout on the water bottle and learn how to get a drink. Leave the dish and water bottle in the cage until you notice your cockatiel using the water bottle several times. Then you safely can retire the water dish.

**Cockatiel food:** When you first get your cockatiel, keep feeding it the same diet it was on, which will minimize its stress during this transition. After a month or two, change the basic diet to a healthier one if your cockatiel needs it. If your cockatiel is eating only seeds, add some fresh fruit, vegetables and pellets. Choose a small pellet size designed for a cockatiel. If a piece of food is too big, a cockatiel will bite into it and chomp it in half, wasting much of the food. If the pellet is too small, they aren't as interested and may search through the dish looking for a bite-size piece of food.

**Nightlights for night frights:** Cockatiels are prone to night frights — becoming startled in the middle of the night and flailing about the cage. Dealing with night frights is a normal part of owning a cockatiel, but positioning a night light near the cage might prevent some of these episodes. We don't know why cockatiels have these episodes. If you hear your cockatiel flailing about the cage, turn on the light and talk to it until it calms down.

**Bathing cockatiels:** Have a plant mister among your essentials so that once a week, and more often when the weather is warm, you can spray your cockatiel with a light mist of water. This will help to keep its feathers glossy and clean, and it may cut down on the dust that a cockatiel naturally produces.

**Cockatiel toys:** Cockatiels need to spend time doing activities that simulate foraging in the wild to keep their curious brains active. Studies have found that a cockatiel anticipates a new toy just as much as it does food. Purchase an assortment of toys for your cockatiel, and change at least one of them weekly. When you rotate the toy back in a few weeks later, it is just like new for your bird.

Some toys should be wood or rawhide that the cockatiel can chew and work its beak on. Cockatiels see colors and appreciate colorful toys. Toys with moving parts are another cockatiel favorite. Don't be surprised to see your cockatiel with its head in its bell toy. Many cockatiels like to sit with their head in a bell to sleep. I can't explain why! They like to ring bells, too. You have to judge whether you can stand listening to ringing bells. Male cockatiels will talk and whistle to their reflection in a mirror.

Toys should be the right size for a cockatiel. Too-small toys may get broken and become dangerous. Big and heavy toys might swing into your bird and injure it.

For your bird's safety, toys should not have loose strings or loops of material. Hardware should be shiny stainless steel,

not dull galvanized metal, which can contain zinc that is toxic to pet birds. A good toy hanger is the c-clamp, which screws closed. Hangers that close with pressure (like key rings and shower hooks and dog-lead clasps) can be harmful to a playful bird if its toes or beak get pinched.

#### No Mite Protector

Don't buy your cockatiel a mite protector. Most birds don't have mites. Your veterinarian will suggest an effective treatment if your bird happens to get them.

#### No Pet Tent Or Hidey Area

Cockatiels have no set breeding time, so if the conditions are right and there's an available nest area, they are stimulated to breed. Do not provide your cockatiel with any kind of pet tent or other hidey area, such as a dark corner of the couch or a tissue box. An enclosed area could cause your cockatiel to become territorial and nippy and to spend hours brooding imaginary or real eggs in there. Excess egg-laying can cause severe health problems.