



Changing your Bird's Diet from Seeds to Pellets

Why do I need to change my bird's diet?

A diet that is predominantly seed is nutritionally inadequate. No matter what is claimed in advertising campaigns or on the back of packaging, seed diets lack the nutrients your bird needs to stay healthy. Birds on seed diets have substantially reduced life spans and weakened immune systems that make the likelihood of costly medical bills much greater.

There is no doubt that birds like the taste of seeds. Seeds taste good for the same reason French fries taste good: they are both high in fat. Parrots are like young children in that, when given a choice, they will eat what tastes best rather than what is best for them. It is up to you, their caregiver, to make sure that what they eat is nutritious as well as appealing.

The best diet for your bird will depend on a number of factors, including his species, body condition, age, reproductive status, and health. As a general rule, larger parrots do best on a predominantly pelleted diet, small parrots do best on a diet that combines pellets and limited amounts of seed, and lorries and lorikeets do best on a formulated liquid diet. Select a diet that is free from artificial colors and flavors, and buy organic if you can. Add in fresh fruits and vegetables, and you will be offering your pet the best nutrition possible. Talk with your veterinarian about which diet is best for your pet bird.

Is it more effective to change the diet gradually or suddenly?

In our experience, gradual diet changes don't work well. Birds are creatures of habit, and if given a choice they would rather eat familiar foods than try something new. In addition, gradual diet changes can take a long time, and many owners lose patience and give up before their birds are converted.

How can I encourage my bird to try the new diet?

Birds in the wild learn which foods are safe to eat from watching their parents. In the home, birds look to their owners for guidance regarding new foods. If you make an excited fuss about your bird's new diet, and show your bird that you think it's yummy, he is much more likely to accept it readily. On the other hand, if you frown and look apprehensive about his new diet, he will be more reluctant to try it. It can also be very helpful for your bird to spend the day observing other birds that already eat pellets.

How long will it take for my bird to eat the new diet?

Some birds will begin eating their new diet immediately, while more stubborn birds may take a few weeks. The important thing is not how quickly it happens, but that your bird is ultimately converted to a nutritious, balanced diet. The major reason people don't succeed in changing their bird's diet is a lack of patience. Don't let this happen to you. The benefits will last a lifetime.

What if my bird throws a temper tantrum?

Some birds will engage in screaming and throwing fits when their familiar seed is removed and pellets appear in their food bowl. Macaws and cockatoos are particularly guilty of this type of manipulative behavior. The best way to nip temper tantrums in the bud is to ignore them. Be patient; your bird will eventually cease and desist.

How do I know if my bird is eating his new diet?

The best methods of evaluating whether your bird is eating his new food are direct observation of his eating habits, and monitoring the amount and character of the droppings he produces. If your bird won't eat pellets in front of you, look for ground up pellets in the food dish or on the floor of the cage. Change the cage papers each morning, so that each day's droppings can be evaluated. The number of droppings a normal bird should produce varies with the size of the bird: a budgie will produce 25-50 stools a day, while a macaw will produce only 8-12.

Normal droppings consist of three parts: the urine portion (clear liquid), the urates (chalky white material), and the feces (green to brown and formed). If your bird's droppings consistently do not contain the fecal portion, then it is likely that your bird is not eating.

Should I feed my bird fruits and vegetables as well as pellets?

Fruits and vegetables can add interest and diversion at mealtime. Concentrate on offering fruits and vegetables that are high in vitamin A, such as carrots, cooked sweet potatoes, and leafy greens. Never feed avocado, which is toxic to parrots. For most birds, fruits and vegetables should make up no more than 20% of the total diet consumed.

If my bird won't eat the diet, should I starve him into it?

Under no circumstances should you let your bird starve. Birds have very high metabolic rates, and will become ill if they go without food for a prolonged period. If your bird doesn't take to the new diet right away, offer him fruits and vegetables in addition to his pellets. If he still refuses to eat, offer him his regular diet in a separate dish for 1 hour in the morning and 1 hour at night. This way he will get the calories he needs while he becomes accustomed to the new food.

If your bird is particularly stubborn about trying his new food, or you are finding the conversion process nerve-wracking, consider boarding your bird at an avian veterinary clinic. Most birds convert to a new diet much more quickly when placed in an unfamiliar environment, and your veterinarian can carefully monitor his weight and how much he is eating.