



THE CENTER FOR

## BIRD & EXOTIC ANIMAL MEDICINE

### **Avian Nutrition**

#### **Philosophy**

Birds are naturally long-lived animals, and a large part of their long lifespan is good diet and husbandry. Studies have shown that birds fed poor or deficient diets have not only a greater incidence of health issues, but they also have up to a 75% reduction in lifespan. Simply by providing a nutritionally balanced diet, birds live longer, are healthier and are simply better family members. At the Avian and Exotic Animal Hospital we believe that the best treatment is prevention, and since many disease conditions can be prevented simply by prescribing good diets, we would like to see all the birds we see have healthy and productive lives.

#### **Feeding Your Bird**

Research and experience show that birds stay healthier and live longer on formulated diets rather than seed-based diets. Formulated diets, also known as pellets, are manufactured to meet the specific nutritional needs of most of our companion birds.

Ideally, companion bird diets should be comprised of a minimum of 50 to 80% formulated food. The remainder should be comprised of produce and healthy table foods. For birds that refuse produce and table food, small amounts of seed should be fed along with the formulated diet, but this amount should be measured and limited to avoid over-eating.

#### **Formulated Diets**

Many brands of formulated food are available. Zupreem is an excellent bird food that is sold through veterinarians and pet stores, as well as online. You will receive a free sample of Zupreem during your bird's first visit to Avian & Exotic Animal Hospital. For birds that dislike Zupreem or prefer a greater variety, there are many other brands from which to choose. Please review the label to make sure you are getting an appropriate sized pellet for your bird.

#### **Low Iron Diets**

Certain breeds such as toucans, mynahs, lorries, lorikeets and Pekin robins are prone to iron storage disease, which is usually fatal if left untreated. These birds require specially formulated foods with low iron and vitamin C content. There are several

brands that indicate they are appropriate for these species; please double check to make sure the iron content is less than 90 ppm. Produce and table food with high iron content, such as raisins, dark leafy greens, meat, and poultry should be minimized or avoided. Foods high in vitamin C should be avoided, due to their ability to enhance iron absorption from the intestines and thus causing iron overload even with low iron diets.

## **Foods to Avoid**

Avocado and chocolate are poisonous to birds and are fatal if fed in sufficient amounts. Also, uncooked dry beans and legumes are toxic.

Foods high in salt and preservatives are undesirable because birds are very sensitive to them. These include salty snacks such as chips, crackers, pretzels and preserved meats.

Light green vegetables such as celery and iceberg lettuce are high in water content and low in nutrients, so they should be minimized. For birds that refuse vegetables other than lettuce, Romaine is an excellent choice.

All peanuts and soybeans have detectable level of aflatoxins, which in very small amounts will cause death to a pet bird. These levels are deemed acceptable by the USDA because these levels are less than what will cause disease in humans, but even very low levels can be very toxic, even deadly, to birds.

Dairy products should not be given to most birds. Most birds do not tolerate milk proteins, milk and milk products (yogurt, cheese) and may cause a low to moderate grade chronic intestinal problem.

## **Produce and Table Food**

Most produce and table foods that are good for people are also nutritional for birds. All fruits and vegetables should be thoroughly washed before feeding. Do not leave fresh foods in the cage for more than five hours.

Please note that diets and ratios can vary between species. Feel free to ask us for specific recommendations for your bird. Some of the more beneficial foods are listed below.

### **Vegetables (cooked or raw)**

Broccoli	Cucumber	Carrots
Green Beans		Sweet potatoes
Spinach		
Dark leafy greens	Peppers	Squash

### **Fruit (small amounts)**

All fruits are acceptable, including citrus. Orange fruits such as papaya, mango, and cantaloupe are highest in vitamin A, citrus are very high in vitamin C, and berries contain anti-oxidants.

### **Protein (Should be less than 5% of diet for most species)**

Cooked meat, fish, chicken and egg

Tree Nuts (Not peanuts)

Cooked beans (raw beans contain toxins that are inactivated by cooking, except green beans)

### **Seed**

Seed is excessively high in fat and low in many vital nutrients. It is also a common source of bacterial infection in birds, since rodents may contaminate it during storage at production facilities. Freezing, refrigerating and microwaving seed will not eliminate the bacteria. For these reasons, it is advantageous to eliminate seed from the diet. However, small amounts (less than 10%) may be used as treats for birds that have not experienced certain health problems, such as recurrent infections or high cholesterol.

### **Supplements**

Birds that consume greater than 50% of their diet in formulated food do not require supplementation. Further supplementation of vital nutrients can be toxic. Many supplements contain very high levels of lipid-soluble vitamins, which store in the body and can easily reach dangerous levels.

"Digestive aids", such as grit, gravel, cuttlebone, and mineral blocks are also unnecessary. All of these supplements have been associated with illnesses in psittacine birds. The exception to grit is pigeons and fowl on non-formulated (non-pelleted) diets.

### **Conversion to Formulated Foods**

Some birds convert to formulated food quickly and willingly while others may take weeks or months. Owner persistence is the key to a successful diet conversion. During the first few days of the diet change many birds express their anger by screaming or throwing food. These behaviors usually stop as they adjust to the conversion process. The initial aversion many birds have to formulated food will gradually turn to acceptance and then to enjoyment.

It is very important to learn how to monitor birds for normal feces as well as consumption of the new food. Please become familiar with not only the consistency and color, but also the number of feces your bird has before beginning a diet conversion. A diet conversion is usually the most important thing you can do for the

longevity of your pet, it must be taken seriously and your bird must be monitored closely by the primary care giver.

Initially, the formulated food should be offered in a separate dish and left in the cage at all times. Usual food items (such as seed and table food) should be restricted to 20 minutes twice daily (smaller birds should be offered 4 times a day), preferably morning and night. This is sufficient for most birds to maintain a normal body weight. Smaller birds such as finches and canaries should use an alternative method listed later on. Most birds will start to nibble the formulated food within a few days. Once they start to play with the food and are breaking it up you can start to decrease the amount of time the seeds are offered by 15 minutes every couple of days. The last part to be stopped is the evening feeding of seeds.

Birds that refuse to consume formulated food after several weeks may be given a softened version. The formulated food is softened in water or juice and very small amounts of the usual foods (such as seeds) are mixed in. The bird must then dig through the mixture to obtain the seed and usually develops a taste for the formulated food in the process. The amount of seed in the mixture is then gradually reduced.

An alternative method for passerines (i.e., finches, canaries) is to mix 25% pellets to 75% seeds for 1 week, then 50:50 the next week, then 75:25 for another week and finally 100% pellets.

Birds maybe hospitalized for dietary conversion when owners are unable or unwilling to undertake the process at home. In a strange environment, the conversion process is usually fast, taking only 5 to 10 days.

If you are interested in this option, please contact the front desk to schedule your bird for "Birdie Diet Boot Camp."

It is important that your bird is in good health before embarking on a diet conversion. Prior to diet conversion we recommend a thorough veterinary screen to identify any underlying health problems as well as to obtain an accurate pre-conversion weight. This step will ensure your bird's diet conversion is done with the least amount of stress and problems for both you and your feathered family member.