



## Chastain Veterinary Medical Group Pet Health Fact Sheet

### The Importance of Proper Diet for Companion Birds

#### Understanding the Seed Junkie and his Diet

A “Seed Junkie” is a pet bird that eats mainly seeds and nuts. These birds steadfastly refuse nearly all other types of food offered. Obviously, a steady diet of bird seed and nuts is not balanced or complete.

Strong dietary preferences are very common among pet birds. Unfortunately, strong dietary preferences for what is in essence junk food virtually guarantees: (1) frequent illnesses, and (2) a greatly shortened life expectancy. For example, consider the table below:

| Species               | Max Life Span | Typical Life Span |
|-----------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Zebra Finch           | 17            | 5                 |
| Canary                | 20            | 8                 |
| Budgerigar            | 18            | 6                 |
| Cockatiel             | 32            | 5                 |
| Cockatoo              | 40            | 15                |
| African Grey          | 50            | 15                |
| Amazon Parrot         | 80            | 15                |
| Macaw                 | 50            | 15                |
| Conure                | 25            | 10                |
| Grey-cheeked Parakeet | 15            | 8                 |

Why such a difference between average life span and maximum life span? Well, the single most important factor that prevents most pet birds from reaching their full genetic potential in terms of life span is poor diet (i.e. a seed based diet).

What’s so bad about seeds? It is now well established that seeds - no matter how they are colored, mixed, or pressed into shapes - are not a complete and nourishing diet for pet birds.

Research has proven that seeds are missing at least 21 different essential nutrients. They are extremely high in fat (oils) and very low in calcium. A bird on a seed diet is like a child on a strict potato chip and soda diet. Neither is very healthy in the long run.

Don’t be fooled by “fortified” seed mixes either. This “fortification” is often accomplished by spraying a liquid vitamin/mineral supplement onto the seeds and allowing it to dry. However, anyone who has watched birds eat knows that this is a waste because the first thing a bird does when it picks up a seed is to shell it and discard the hull!

**Chastain Veterinary Medical Group**

Meadow Brook Animal Hospital – 972-529-5033 · Preston Road Animal Hospital – 972-239-1309

<http://chastainvets.info>

Adding a liquid vitamin/mineral supplement to the drinking water is an improvement over raw or fortified seeds, but even this is problematic. It has been shown that adding a liquid vitamin and mineral supplement to drinking water can increase the bacterial count in the water by over 100 fold in less than 24 hours. Do we really want our birds drinking that? I think not.

So, why do pet birds become so easily “hooked“ on seeds? Two reasons: First, feeding seeds is easy and convenient for us humans. Second, seeds are quite tasty due to their relatively high fat and oil content, so birds readily eat them. Research at the University of California at Davis suggests that the relatively high fat (oil) content of seeds produces an “energy rush” similar to the “sugar” rush children experience when eating high sugar “junk foods”.

Parrots, like humans, will preferentially eat high fat foods when given the opportunity. In the case of pet birds, when these high fat foods are withdrawn, the “addicted” birds will often go into a funk, displaying a profound depression and craving for the seeds. This makes the humans feel sorry for the birds so they give them more seeds. This behavior undoubtedly contributes to the high prevalence of “Seed Junkies”.

### **The Preferred Diet for a Pet Bird**

Birds tend to select their foods according to habit, appearance, and social factors. Social factors (peer pressure, jealousy, curiosity, etc) come into play mainly in a flock setting. Social factors have less impact on the foods chosen by the typical pet bird. Consequently, most solitary pet birds rely on habit and appearance to select their foods. Unfamiliar or threatening food items are automatically rejected, and favorite foods are consumed to the exclusion of all other foods.

In the wild, the natural seasonal changes in food availability forces birds to consume a varied and balanced diet. In captivity, however, practicality limits us to offering only a few, or at most a few dozen, different food items. Seldom are these the sorts of foods that the bird would find in its native habitat. The limited variety of foods that can be offered to captive birds, plus their natural tendency to eat only “favorite” foods means that it is very, very unlikely that a captive pet bird will consume a balanced diet on its own, even if one is offered. A diet based on formulated bird pellets avoids this problem. With pellets, all the known required nutrients are present in proper amounts and proper proportions in a single food item. The bird can’t pick and choose when it is fed pellets.

Therefore, at the present time, the ideal diet for a pet bird is thought to consist of 80% commercial formulated bird pellets, plus 20% fruits, vegetables, and “people food”.

### **Commercial Bird Pellets**

Below is a small sampling of manufacturers that now offer one or more lines of quality bird pellets. There are others, but this should give you a start.

- Harrison’s Bird Diets (HBD) - 7171 Mercy Road, Suite 135, Omaha, NE 68106.
- Mazuri Exotic Animal Feeds - PMI Feeds, Inc. 1401 S. Hanley Rd., St. Louis MO, 63144
- Pretty Bird - Pretty Bird International, Inc. Zupreem - PO Box 2094, Mission KS 66202
- Lafeber Premium Daily Diets - Lafeber Company - 24981 N. 1400 E. Rd., Cornell, IA 51139
- Roudybush Pellets - Roudybush, Inc., 3550 Watt Ave., Suite 8, Sacramento, CA 95821
- Hagen - Rolf C. Hagen (USA), Inc. Mansfield, MA 02048

#### **Chastain Veterinary Medical Group**

Meadow Brook Animal Hospital – 972-529-5033 · Preston Road Animal Hospital – 972-239-1309

<http://chastainvets.info>

## **Vegetables**

When selecting fruits and vegetables to offer birds, select those that are high in beta-carotene, such as dark green or dark yellow vegetables or fruits. These would include: sweet potato pumpkin parsley Brussels sprouts winter squash escarole apricot mango broccoli spinach collard greens endive romaine papaya

The amounts of the fruits and vegetables fed must be carefully limited to 20% of the diet. Use the following table as a guide:

Small - Medium birds . . . . . 1 - 2 tsp per day

Medium - Large birds . . . . . 3 - 4 tsp per day

## **Bird Feeding Tips**

Please keep the following points when feeding pet birds:

- Grit is probably not necessary when feeding a formulated pelleted diet.
- Seeds and nuts really have no place in the average pet bird's diet, except for use as a reward during training.
- Clean, fresh, uncontaminated water should be available at all times.
- Food and water bowls should be cleaned twice daily.
- Food and water containers should be placed so that droppings do not easily fall into them.
- Sipper tube water bottles are preferred over water bowls (less contamination).
- Lorries require a specialized diet that includes soft gruels, nectars, and special powders.

## **Changing the Diet**

Many birds develop poor eating habits (seed dependency) during the time they are in a pet shop before purchase. Habituation is a function of time and familiarity. A bird may spend upwards of year in a pet shop before purchase. Feeding a seed mix is easy and cheap for humans. Seeds may be the pre-dominant food - or the only food - available during these periods of time. Under such circumstances, birds, like humans, can easily become habituated in their feeding behaviors and dietary preferences. Birds must gain a substantial familiarity with a given food item before they will experiment with it or attempt to eat it.

Unfortunately, simply offering a new food item along with a preferred or favorite food items is rarely, if ever, sufficient to get a bird to eat a new food item. Typically, they completely ignore - or throw out - the new food, and continue to consume the favorite food items.

Before beginning a forced diet change, it is advisable to have your bird examined and tested by a veterinarian. Be aware that some veterinarians will not see birds as patients. Furthermore, some of those who will see birds actually have little or no experience with birds as patients. When in doubt, ask.

For a number of reasons, we recommend that bird owners purchase an inexpensive postal type scale. We advise all bird owners to weigh their bird(s) at the same time of day, every single day. The weight should be recorded in a log and may be graphed if desired. Daily weight checks are especially important during a forced food conversion because some weight loss is normal, but too much weight loss could be an early warning of a true medical problem. As a general rule, birds in a home setting should not lose more than about 10% or so of their original body weight during a forced food conversion.

### **Chastain Veterinary Medical Group**

Meadow Brook Animal Hospital – 972-529-5033 · Preston Road Animal Hospital – 972-239-1309

<http://chastainvets.info>

## Specific Strategies & Tips for Pellet Conversion

**First, Change to Meal Feeding.** In the wild, most birds eat during 1-3 discreet “feeding bursts”, each lasting about 20-30 minutes. A morning meal and an evening meal is a common pattern. They spend the rest of their day away from food sources, flying, preening, playing or otherwise engaging in behaviors totally unrelated to eating.

This is in contrast to the typical pet bird who is on a Free Choice feeding program. Such a bird typically has PLENTY of food available in its cage, twenty-four hours a day, and is never more than a couple of steps away from it. The relative inactivity of most caged birds (compared to their wild cousins), combined with boredom, and the constant opportunity to eat or overeat at any time of the day or night, results in obesity in a large number of pet birds.

Thus, a simple first step in changing your birds diet is to return the bird to the natural feeding pattern that it was designed for by evolution.

Instead of leaving food in the cage 24 hours a day, offer food items for just 15-30 minutes, two or three times a day (Young birds may require four meals per day). At the end of the time period, any uneaten food is removed from the bird’s enclosure. No more food is offered until the next meal. Water, however, should be available at all times.

In addition to being more natural, meal feeding has the additional benefit of allowing the bird to get hungry between meals. A hungry bird may be more willing to experiment with or eat new foods!

**Introducing Pellets - Cold Turkey.** Once a bird is on a meal feeding program, it’s time to introduce the pellets. The Cold Turkey approach involves removing the old seed-based diet at night and replacing it with the new pelleted diet, which will then be the only food available at dawn’s early light. This procedure is quite simple and works well for some birds, under close supervision. However, some birds may not recognize the new pellets as food. These birds will whine and beg and may actually starve themselves to death. Therefore, this method is recommended only for use by experienced aviculturists or avian veterinarians.

**Introducing Pellets - Mixing.** The Mixing approach to pellet conversion was intended to help avoid the risks and perils of starvation. This approach involves gradually replacing some of seeds with pellets at meal time. Start by replacing a small amount of the seeds with a some pellets. Over time, replace more and more of the seeds with pellets. In time, each meal should consist of 10% pellets, then 25%, then say 50% pellets, and eventually 100% pellets. If the change is gradual enough, over time (several days to several weeks) , a cooperative bird will transition onto pellets without much trouble. Some birds, however, are smart enough to realize what’s going on. These birds will resist the pellets, whine and beg; doing their best to make the humans feel guilty. It is at this point that many people cave in. So the success rate for this method is not as good as with other methods.

**Introducing Pellets - Constant Availability.** This is the best method for the average bird owner in a home setting. Once the bird is comfortable with a meal feeding program, introduce the pellets as follows. Start by having a bowl of the new food (pellets) available in the cage at all times. Continue meal feeding the seed based diet. When the bird gets hungry between meals, it may discover that the pellets are not so bad after all. Once the bird is willingly eating some of the pellets between seed meals, gradually replace

### Chastain Veterinary Medical Group

Meadow Brook Animal Hospital – 972-529-5033 · Preston Road Animal Hospital – 972-239-1309

<http://chastainvets.info>

more and more of the seeds in each meal with pellets. Eventually, it should be possible to completely eliminate the seeds.

**Change something else besides the food.** Some birds benefit from having additional changes in their environment at the same time as the diet change. In this way the new food itself may seem less frightening. For example, remove all toys from the enclosure so that the new food becomes the only distraction, or move the entire enclosure to a new room, or temporarily house the bird in an empty aquarium or bathtub with pellets sprinkled on the bottom near a container of water. Heating the new food up slightly, or moistening it with a little fruit juice may also encourage a reluctant bird to give it a try.

**Monkey See - Monkey Do.** Another bird that is already eating pellets can be temporarily housed near the reluctant bird and used as a model or trainer bird. In times passed, some aviculturists and pet shops even had trainer birds available for rent! Owners themselves can also act as models by pretending to eat some of the pellets while the reluctant bird is watching. Taking this another step, some experts suggest that bringing your bird - and its bowl of pellets - to the dinner table may be a rewarding ploy. Likewise, hand feeding the new food items to the bird while you pretend to also eat some yourself may help your bird to accept new and unfamiliar foods. Caution: do not feed your bird from your mouth because the normal bacteria in human mouths may be harmful to pet birds. A bird's beak can also do serious damage to a person's lips!

**Hospitalization May Be Necessary.** In certain cases (old birds, marginally sick birds, budgies and cockatoos), or in cases where all else has failed, hospitalization for feed conversion may achieve the desired results. During this time, the bird is first allowed to acclimate to its new environment. Then the hospital staff gradually weans the bird off seeds and onto the proper diet. The bird's weight and its droppings are monitored daily and special care can be given if needed. The key to success with this technique is thought to be the temporary separation of the highly bonded bird from its owner.

### **The Transformation Process**

Modifying your birds diet from a seed based diet to a balanced pellet based diet will produce some extraordinary results. As your bird adjusts to the new healthy diet, you will see a definite improvement in its appearance and perhaps even its behavior.

Many birds will experience a major molt 1 - 2 months after conversion. This is because their body finally has the nutrients it needs to make a proper set of healthy feathers. Owners have remarked that their birds look more brilliant, that they talk more, and are more playful and better behaved since they started eating better.

### **Patience is Rewarded**

All of the strategies mentioned above should be considered in your effort to encourage your pet bird to eat properly. It cannot be overemphasized that you must be very persistent and patient with your bird in this endeavor. Changing your birds diet will require a total commitment on your part. It may take many months to achieve the desired results, but the effort made and the frustration endured will pay dividends in improved health and long life for your companion.

#### **Chastain Veterinary Medical Group**

Meadow Brook Animal Hospital – 972-529-5033 · Preston Road Animal Hospital – 972-239-1309

<http://chastainvets.info>