

# TRANSITIONING PET PARROTS AWAY FROM A SEED DIET

## INTRODUCTION

Companion parrots are often offered a largely seed and nut-based diet. Unfortunately, seed and nut-based diets are not nutritionally complete and balanced diets; in addition, they are high in fat and calories. All-seed diets predispose companion birds to vitamin and mineral deficiencies, obesity, immunosuppression, ill health and, potentially, a greatly shortened life expectancy. Most companion parrots will lead a longer, healthier life when fed a formulated diet designed specifically for parrots supplemented with fresh vegetables and fruit (choose organic when possible). Formulated diets contain more appropriate levels of fats, proteins, vitamins, minerals and other nutrients that birds need compared to seed and nut-based diets. Unfortunately, convincing our parrots that giving up their favorite fatty foods is for their own good can be a challenge!



## Why Do Parrots Love to Eat Seeds and Nuts So Much?

In the wild, parrots do not have access to large amounts of high fat foods, such as seeds and nuts; thus, when they come across these foods, it makes sense to eat as much as possible. While this evolutionary drive makes sense for the wild bird, it becomes a real problem for our avian companions when they have free access to high fat foods. This drive is also the reason our companion birds cannot be trusted to choose a balanced diet for themselves; their natural instinct is to eat all the fattiest foods first. Studies have been conducted with Amazon parrots confirming this instinct; when given the choice between seeds of varying fat content, they would always choose the highest calorie items first and then, after consuming it all, move to the second and third most calorie dense items.<sup>1</sup> Thus, when they are offered unrestricted access to high fat foods, it is often all that they will eat. Formulated diets help to prevent a bird from preferentially selecting a single food source and help ensure that the bird receives the necessary nutrients needed daily.

Switching from an all-seed diet to a formulated nugget and produce diet can be difficult. Companion parrots can be neophobic, meaning they are afraid of new things, and they tend to select their foods according to habit. Thus, they may reject formulated diets simply because they are different or not even recognized as food.

The good news is there are many methods used to help with the process of converting your bird to a more balanced diet; you may find that modifying or combining methods works the best for you and your bird.



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## Things To Note Before Starting Dietary Conversion

- Not all birds do best on a formulated diet; consultation with an avian veterinarian is recommended before starting any diet changes.
- It is important to note that patience is key to any successful dietary conversion program. Praise your bird when it tries a new food and be prepared for it to take weeks or months for your bird to totally accept food items other than seeds or nuts.
- When starting a diet change, the droppings of the bird may change in color, size, and consistency. This can be normal, depending on what is being fed, as some nuggets and produce may contain dyes or natural colors, or have a higher moisture content. Taking photographs of the droppings and discussing these changes with your veterinarian is important until the transition is complete and the “new normal” for droppings is established.
- Transitioning a bird to a new diet is stressful and diet changes should never be attempted with sick birds or those undergoing multiple stressors such as a change of environment, introduction of a new cage mate, or exposure to temperature extremes.
- Birds undergoing dietary conversions should be weighed several times weekly to ensure no more than 5-10% loss of body weight (ask your avian veterinarian for AAV’s “Digital Scales” handout for more information on weighing your bird). For example, a cockatiel weighing 100g prior to starting the diet conversion should not lose more than 5-10g of weight. If excessive weight loss is noted, an avian veterinarian should be contacted about the next steps.





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## The Importance of Variety

Variety is important for a balanced diet, but also to figure out which items a bird enjoys; though we want our birds to eat a healthy, balanced diet, we still want them to have fun with their meals! Not only should a bird be offered a variety of high-quality food options to choose from, but presentation of items can also make a world of difference in how the new food is perceived.

When offering fresh fruits and vegetables, vary the size, shape, and texture of food items. For example, a very small bird may be frightened if offered something too large but may take more readily to a newly offered fruit or vegetable if it is chopped finely, shredded, or offered in sticks. In the same way, a bird may be more likely to eat cooked versus raw foods, or whole versus more prepared items. Also, parrots are playful and curious so try offering vegetables in spirals or coils, woven through toys or cage bars, or in cakes, breads or mashes. You can also try hanging pieces of broccoli or damp leafy greens from the bars at the top of the cage for your bird to explore and nibble on.

When transitioning to nuggets, have available many different shapes, colors and textures and observe which one the bird seems most interested in. Moistening or softening the nuggets before offering them can also be a good way to provide variety. Nuggets can be finely crushed and used to coat foods, like fruits, vegetables, or pasta, that the bird already enjoys. This will help the bird develop a taste for the new diet, and desensitize it to the new scent or appearance. The texture at which the nugget is crushed can then be made more coarse with time, until the uncrushed, normal size is achieved and the table food is removed. Once your bird likes to eat nuggets, consider offering two or three different brands of nuggets for continued variety.



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## Dietary Conversion Methods

### Restriction of Seeds

One method of encouraging experimentation with other foods involves restricting the amount of seeds offered daily. To use this method, estimate the amount of seed your bird consumes in a day. Then combine 50% of the seed your bird eats in a day with the new diet and offer the combination in your bird's food bowl. The idea with this method is that your bird becomes hungry enough to hopefully experiment with the new food, but should not starve.

### Flock Feeding

Most parrots are flock animals, and will look to their caregivers for guidance as to whether a food is safe for consumption. It can be helpful to enthusiastically consume, or pretend to consume, the new food and then offer the item to the bird. If the bird views one of its owners in high regard, or views a family member as a rival, having the rival offer the food to its perceived mate can entice a bird to try it for themselves. Remember, due to the difference in bacteria carried by humans and parrots, food should never be offered by mouth. Similarly, if there is a parrot in the home that eats nuggets well, that bird can be a good role model for a bird that doesn't recognize nuggets as food.

Another way to encourage your seed eating flock member to try a formulated diet is to place several piles of different kinds of nuggets on a flat surface and tap with a finger in front of the food items. This not only allows the bird to examine the foods and choose which one seems most appealing, but it also makes a sound similar to a beak tapping to collect food. You can also pick a nugget up between your thumb and index finger and roll it around close to the tabletop; this motion mimics a bird manipulating food in its mouth—to the bird it looks as if you are "eating" the nugget with your fingers.

### Novel Area Feeding

It may be helpful to introduce new foods outside of the cage or placed adjacent to a favorite toy or perch. By the same token, it can be helpful to offer ground foraging birds, like parakeets and cockatiels, food on a flat surface like a table, or even a mirror. If a mirror is used, the bird may see its reflection and view it as a flock-mate consuming the new diet.

### Interval Feeding

Interval feeding is another way to encourage acceptance of new foods by your bird. When using this method, instead of leaving food in the cage 24 hours a day, a restricted quantity of seed is offered for 20-30 minutes, two to three times a day. After this time period, the uneaten seed diet is removed while the new diet and water are maintained and replenished as needed throughout the day.

Once the bird has become accustomed to this routine, the first seed feeding to cut out will be the morning feeding. The idea with this is that the bird should be most hungry in the morning, after fasting all night, and more likely to try the novel diet. Once the bird has taken to the formulated diet, the evening feeding and the midday feedings can be dropped until eventually seeds are only offered as a treat or supplement.



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## Patience is Vital

It is important to remember that patience is key. It is vital that owners be persistent and patient with their bird; improving the bird's diet requires a lot of time and commitment. It can take weeks, months or even a year to achieve the desired result, but the payoff will be a healthier avian companion, hopefully for many years to come.

Remember, change is difficult for all of us including our companion birds. It is normal for birds to act out when beginning a new diet. Examples include: increased screaming, aggression, destructive behavior, or throwing of food. These types of behaviors typically will reach a peak before they decline. Concerned owners should contact their avian veterinarian for additional guidance in these situations.

## A Final Thought

Though it is important that the majority of your bird's calories come from healthy foods, it generally won't hurt to offer your bird the occasional special treat. Remember that birds are much smaller than us so their treats should likewise be very small and constitute 10% or less of their total ingested (not offered) diet. Treats ideally should be reserved for foraging or training opportunities.

## Resources

Many manufacturers of formulated diets for birds offer suggestions on how to successfully convert birds to their diet. Some examples are included below.

- <https://www.harrisonsbirdfoods.com/new-to-harrisons.asp>
- <https://lafeber.com/pet-birds/how-to-switch-or-convert-your-bird-from-seeds-to-pellets/>
- <https://roudybush.myshopify.com/pages/switching-to-roudybush>
- <https://zupreem.com/avian-conversion/> (This website has three videos on different methods of converting your pet to a formulated diet which you may find helpful.)



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## References

1. Brightsmith DJ. Nutritional Levels of Diets Fed to Captive Amazon Parrots: Does Mixing Seed, Produce, and Pellets Provide a Healthy Diet? *J Avian Med Surg.* 2012;26(3):149-160.

## Special Thanks

This handout written by Salina Locke, DVM . Photos provided by: Andrea Fatoool, Stephanie Lamb, Bobbie Jackson, and Anna Osofsky.

## AAV: Setting a Standard in Avian Care Since 1980

Avian medicine is a distinct and very specialized field that requires extensive training, advanced skills, and facilities specifically designed and equipped to treat and hospitalize birds. The Association of Avian Veterinarians was established to provide veterinarians with this special education, and to keep them up to date with the latest information on bird health. The AAV holds an annual conference on avian medicine and publishes the peer-reviewed *Journal of Avian Medicine and Surgery*. AAV also makes annual contributions toward avian conservation and sponsors studies advancing the understanding of avian medicine.

## For More Information

For more information on birds, ask your veterinarian for copies of the following AAV Client Education Brochures:

- Avian Chlamydiosis and Psittacosis\*
- Veterinary Care for Your Pet Bird\*
- Basic Care for Companion Birds\*
- Behavior: Normal and Abnormal
- Caring for Backyard Chickens
- Digital Scales
- Feather Loss
- Feeding Birds
- Foraging for Parrots\*
- Injury Prevention and Emergency Care
- Managing Chronic Egg-laying in Your Pet Bird
- Protecting Your Pet Bird from Household Dangers\*
- Signs of Illness in Companion Birds\*
- Ultraviolet Lighting for Companion Birds
- When Should I Take My Bird to a Veterinarian?\*
- Zoonotic Diseases in Backyard Poultry\*



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\*Available in multiple languages. All others are available in English only at this time.

## Online Resources

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