



Medical Center for Birds

www.medicalcenterforbirds.com

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Diet Adjustment

An overabundance of food, foods high in fat and calories like a diet consisting primarily of seed, nuts, and processed foods can lead to overconsumption, obesity, hyperactivity, reproductive stimulation, a decline in desire of your bird to interact with you or it's "flock", and a decrease in your ability to use food rewards for positive reinforcement training. Generally, we recommend a parrot's diet to consist of roughly 80% formulated pellet, 20% vegetables and limited fruit and seed/treats. Please note that this is a general recommendation and depending on the species, health, lifestyle and there may be changes to this formula. There are some methods, including changing the diet "cold turkey" and switching pellets from the bird's current diet by a percentage each day until the diet is completely pellets, that have inherent flaws and teach by coercion not choice.

Here are some of our preferred techniques to help guide you through changing your bird's diet:

- Offer several types of pellets for your bird to play with. The more options your bird has to choose from, the more chances you have to find a type of pellet that they like. Formulated pellets come in different shapes, sizes, colors, and flavors. Practice these exercises 2-3 times daily for about 5 minutes and do not replace the current diet until you notice evidence that your bird is eating pellets.
- Try this! When your bird is sharing time with you from its training perch or favorite spot, eat (or act like you are eating) the different pellets in front of your bird. Make sure that you really enjoy the pellets, and show your enjoyment to your bird. Offer some to your bird, but do not try to force the issue. Give them a limited time to accept the offer (a few seconds). If they don't take it, keep "eating" the food and make it obvious that you are enjoying it. If your bird enjoys verbal praise or excitement, congratulate them for trying the new food! Make it fun!
- Another technique to try is to spread a variety pellets out on a table surface covered by towel, and set your bird down on the table. Use your hand to simulate a scratching and pecking flock member. Pick at the pellets, crunch them in your fingernails, and flick them about. This approach can be particularly helpful for those species that forage naturally on the ground, such as cockatiels and budgies.
- Smaller birds, like budgies or cockatiels, will play with and explore pellets when they are placed on top of a mirror. This can be used in addition to other diet conversion techniques.
- Some of the pellet brands, like ZuPreem, can be soaked in warm water and offer to birds as a "treat." This can help with diet conversion if the bird enjoys soft, warm food as special treats, like hand feeding formula or table scraps. Once they are eating the moistened pellet, gradually offer pellets that are less soggy until they are eating the normal pellet.

During your diet conversion journey, you may want to consider purchasing a gram scale to monitor your bird's body weight. Although this is not absolutely necessary, it can offer a peace of mind when we go start to replace seed with pellets. No more than a 5-8% drop in body weight should be observed during this process (in most circumstances).

Monitoring droppings is very important during this process and will inform us what our bird is eating, how much, or if they are not eating at all. Once the birds are regularly consuming a pellet diet you will notice changes in their droppings. The droppings will generally be larger and lighter in color



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than when on seed, or the color of the pellet being eaten. For example, red pellet=red feces, purple pellets=purple droppings. If you only see scanty, dark green feces or black feces, your bird may not be eating and should be given his original diet immediately. Additionally, if your bird looks ill, fluffed, or quiet, please offer the original diet. This is a good scenario to check your birds body weight and call if you have additional questions. Care should be taken to avoid forcing your bird to transition to a new diet, this will prevent starvation or other potential complications.

Once you notice your bird eating pellets, chewing pellets and passing pellet-colored dropping, you can start to gradually replacing the current diet with their pellet of choice. Each day, replace the current diet with a tiny bit more pellets. Continue practicing the diet conversion techniques until you have completely replaced the old diet with the preferred pellet. Another technique, once your bird is eating pellets, is to try offering only pellets but this should only be done if you will be home ALL DAY to observe your bird. Check on your bird through the day and watch the droppings to make sure they are continuing to eat. If the droppings become small and scanty, offer the original diet. Remember that diet conversion can take time and patience, it does not need to happen overnight. Once your bird's diet is changed to pellets you can look forward to a healthier bird, potential for more strong food reinforcers for training and foraging, and a stronger bond with your bird!