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GETTING YOUR BIRD TO EAT A BALANCED DIET

You may be aware that seed is a very poor diet for your bird. Seed is deficient in vitamins, calcium, etc., and can have excessive fat and calories. Feeding a seed diet is like eating potato chips as the sole source of nutrition in your diet. Feeding a balanced diet of about 80% formulated pellets and 20% nutritious "people foods" is a much better choice to allow your bird to live as long and as healthy a life as possible.

Birds that have never been exposed to pellets and other foods may not initially recognize them as food. It will take time and patience to convert your bird to a better diet, but the long-term health benefits are worth the effort.

The ideal situation is to wean a young bird onto a varied diet, including several types of pellets, so it will recognize them as edible. If you have an older bird on a seed diet, there are several methods you can use to reeducate it about nutrition. Do NOT try to starve your bird to a pelleted diet! Some birds will not recognize new things as food, and could actually starve.

Initially, mix a small amount of the pelleted diet into the regular seed mix. The bird's usual response will be to throw most of the food on the floor at first. At least it will begin to be accustomed to seeing the pellets in association with food, and it may get a taste of the pellets while trying to get rid of them. Watch closely to see if any of the pellets are eaten. If it seems that the bird is eating the pellets, gradually increase the amount of pellets and decrease the amount of seed.

If the bird doesn't start eating the pellets after the first few weeks of mixing it with the seed, remove the seeds each morning and put a dish of pellets in the cage. Your bird will be more likely to eat the pellets when it is hungry if there is no other food around. Be sure to replace the seed and pellet mixture in the evening so the bird does not go without food.

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For birds that are very bonded to their owners, it is often possible to entice them to try new foods by allowing them to see the owner eating (or at least pretending to eat) and enjoying the new food item. This can be accomplished by allowing your bird to join in meal time with the family. This allows them to watch and share the food that everybody is enjoying, and it allows the bird to feel part of the "flock."

Table foods can be introduced in a similar manner. The most nutritious foods include dark green and orange vegetables (carrots, green beans, braccoli, squash, sweet potatoes, etc.), low fat dairy products (in limited amounts), pastas, etc. A little fruit can be offered as a treat, but most birds don't have a large vitamin C requirement, and there are not many other nutrients in fruit that birds require.

When implementing any diet change, be sure to monitor your bird's weight carefully. Ideally, weigh it frequently on a gram scale. If this isn't possible, you can at least feel the amount of muscle over the keel (breast bone). The bone should not feel prominent or sharp. If it appears that excessive weight loss is occurring, feed the bird its accustomed diet and proceed more slowly.

Fully changing a bird's diet from seed to pellet can take up to 1 year, especially in older birds. In fact, some species of birds, like cockatiels, may never switch to a pelleted diet. In the more difficult birds, some other more nutritionally balanced diets are Lafaber's Nutriberries or Avi-Cakes. These two options are still primarily seed diets but they are fortified with more nutrients and proteins than typical seed based diets.

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