

Your Parrot's Diet

By Sharon St. Joan

Twenty or thirty years ago, people thought that parrots could be fed a seeds-only diet without any detrimental effects. Now, there is a general understanding that a parrot's diet must contain a wide variety of foods, and that a seeds-only diet will fairly quickly lead to severe malnutrition and illness. A seeds-only diet is deficient in a number of essential nutrients – most notably, Vitamin A.



We can't tell you exactly what to feed your parrot, since it varies with each species. We'll cover a few basic principles, and then you'll need to do considerable research on your own – on the Internet, from books and magazines, from people, such as your avian veterinarian and perhaps a good friend who takes excellent care of his or her parrots. Investigate a variety of resources, until you feel you have a good idea of the kinds of food that are generally recommended for the type of parrot you have (or may be acquiring).

Can my parrot live on pellets alone?

Pellets for parrots are food that is manufactured for parrots. Pellets are considered to be nutritionally complete, and are sometimes recommended as the sole item in a parrot's diet. However, there are a few problems with this concept. Ask yourself if you would be happy eating mashed potatoes three meals a day, year in and year out. Since you're an intelligent being who enjoys variety, you would most likely become very bored, or downright disgruntled, with your diet. The same is true for your parrot.

Another difficulty with the pellets-only concept is that the more we as humans turn to more natural, more healthy dietary habits, the less happy we feel in trusting that any one processed food, for people or for parrots, can really meet every nutritional need.

Today, most informed people feed their parrots a wide variety of foods – fresh fruits, vegetables, nuts, parrot biscuits, healthy "people" food (such as pasta, grains, cooked legumes, and apple sauce), along with high-quality pellets and a high-quality seed mixture that is appropriate for the species of parrot and preferably organic, since residual pesticides are very harmful to birds. Avoid foods that are highly processed and/or contain salt, sugar, caffeine, alcohol, artificial colorings, and flavors.

What if my parrot won't eat anything but seeds?

A parrot who has been fed a seeds-only diet is generally very resistant to eating fruit, vegetables, and nuts – in fact, she may not even recognize these as food at all. You should persevere in encouraging your parrot to eat fruits and vegetables, but this must be done with care. Don't deprive your parrot of seeds in an attempt to get her to eat

other foods. It can be dangerous, and even fatal, to deprive your parrot of the only food she will eat. There have been cases of parrots starving, rather than eating strange food.

So, it is necessary to proceed with great patience and understanding. There are many tactics and techniques that you can try, and much helpful information available about how to encourage your parrot to eat fruits and vegetables. For instance, if your parrot spends some time in his cage, try clipping a piece of broccoli, apple, carrot, corn on the cob, or a spinach leaf to the cage bars. You can use clips that are made especially for food treats. Do this while continuing to give him his regular food as usual. After a few days of thinking about the new “toys” that are appearing in his cage, he will begin to nibble on them.

Be sensitive, though, to the fears that your bird may feel. A large carrot looming overhead may send your bird into the far corner of his cage. You may need to start out with a small piece of carrot near the bottom of the cage, and progress gradually, step by step, as your parrot gets used to the strange object.

When you’re just introducing a new food to your bird, you’ll probably need to offer the *same* new food over a number of days, before the first nibble is taken. A different color and shape of food every day would be confusing, so, at first, offer the same new food several times before trying another new one.

After your bird has begun to eat several different fruits and vegetables, it’s very important to ensure variety. Many vegetables can actually *cause* vitamin deficiencies if they are fed repeatedly to your bird to the exclusion of other vegetables; for example, offering only spinach leaves, day after day, can lead to a calcium deficiency.

Another useful technique is to feed your bird the foods she likes best, and is most used to, in the afternoon or early evening – and start out the day with a breakfast of some fruits, veggies, and pellets. If you do this, monitor your bird’s intake of food very carefully to make absolutely sure she is getting enough to eat and is not losing weight. Don’t assume that because the food is gone, it has been eaten – you may find it later tucked into a toy or lying somewhere on the floor where it has been flung.

Here is a short list of some fruits, veggies, and other foods to introduce gradually: broccoli, spinach, kale, chard, peas, string beans, corn, carrots, yams, sweet potatoes, squash, peppers, hard-boiled or scrambled eggs (with no seasoning), apples, pears, bananas, grapes, mangos, papayas, cherries, apricots, kiwi, yogurt, pasta (in small quantities), nuts (unsalted only), and peanuts (should be unsalted but not raw in the shells, since the shells may contain a fungus toxic to parrots).

Can my parrot join me at the dinner table?

Many parrots enjoy sitting at the table with their people – and some people enjoy this, too! If you and your parrot have dinner together, some rules are in order: Don’t leave your bird on the table alone (there are hidden dangers, such as a glass of water or a bowl of hot soup). Make sure your parrot gets only *very* small quantities of healthy food. Focus on fruits and vegetables, and steer clear of processed foods and those foods with

seasoning, spices, sauces, salt or sugar. Your parrot is smaller than you are, so a little goes a long way.

Some foods, such as avocado, chocolate and caffeine, are toxic to birds. Some natural fruits and vegetables, such as tomatoes, parsley and apple cores, have minute traces of toxic substances. The best rule of thumb, though, is to use common sense: Grapes and broccoli are good; potato chips and cookies are bad.

Can my parrot become overweight?

Birds can, and many do, become seriously overweight. Obesity is a health problem for them, just as it would be for a human. Often, the problem is caused either by a lack of exercise or by too much of certain fattening foods – nuts or sunflower seeds, for example. The intake of sunflower seeds needs to be restricted; the seed mix your bird receives should have very few sunflower seeds, or none at all. Your bird also needs regular check-ups with your avian veterinarian.

Should I give my bird vitamins and minerals?

Vitamin and mineral supplements are also usually required to keep your bird in good health. It *is* possible to give overdoses of vitamins and minerals, so do some research. You should also consult your avian veterinarian about which vitamin and mineral supplements would be best. Vitamins that are added to drinking water, if they sit too long or they're in the sun, may become a breeding ground for bacteria. Your bird's water will need to be changed at least once a day and, if it contains vitamins, twice a day may be better. Powdered vitamins that are added to food will usually fall to the bottom of a seed dish, so it's best to sprinkle them on fruit or veggies.

Your parrot's diet will require a great deal of work. First, you'll have to do research and consult knowledgeable people to develop a healthy diet plan and, second, you'll need to spend a significant amount of time every day preparing varied and nutritious food for your bird. But, putting in the time and work required to give your parrot a healthy diet will mean you're doing your best, as you would for a child, to ensure that your parrot companion is happy, healthy, and energetic.

For more information on parrots and parrot care, visit the Avian Welfare Coalition website at www.avianwelfare.org.

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