



## THE BIRD CLINIC VETERINARY CORPORATION

### NUTRITIONAL PROBLEMS IN PET BIRDS

Tradition dictates that pet birds eat predominately, if not exclusively a seed diet. Unfortunately, this tradition has created a number of situations which promote nutritional imbalance and medical problems for our pet and aviary birds. Some feeding traditions have become so entrenched in today's society that it seems like heresy to alter these "accepted" methods of care. Five areas seem to contribute to producing nutritional imbalances. Any one of these or a combination can cause serious malnutrition, poor immunity, illness, and a shortened lifespan.

#### VEGETARIAN TYPE DIETS

A "classic" seed diet is a vegetarian diet still promoted today by many people in the pet industry. Unfortunately, seeds contain protein of low biological value, as do grains, fruits, greens, and vegetables. The amino-acid structure of these foods is deficient in both quantity and quality of essential amino acids, making vegetarian diets hazardous. Deficiencies of essential amino acids easily can and do occur, especially in Cockatoo species. In addition, many scientific papers have demonstrated that seed diets provide only 20% of the necessary calcium levels for an adult bird. It is not surprising from this data that many new patients presented to The BIRD Clinic suffer from metabolic bone disease and various signs of hypocalcaemia as well as anemia and poor muscle growth from amino acid deficiencies.

#### UNBALANCED DIETS

In most instances, seed diets have not been scientifically formulated and are not balanced. Birds eating these diets run a high risk of malnutrition. Commercial birdseed diets are usually not nutritionally complete, and if complete, rarely reveal that the diet is ONLY balanced if EVERY part of the mix is eaten. Some diets do not even list their ingredients for comparison and evaluation. Homemade customized seed diets often have been put together with the best of intentions and the best of ingredients, but trying to balance a bird's diet without training in nutrition to at least the Ph.D. level is like trying to fix a car without a manual. Diets need to be evaluated through a process of calculations, chemical analysis and testing before they can be considered satisfactory. They must be tested in controlled feeding trials with LIVE birds for an extended period (3-5 years) to fully evaluate whether the analysis is indeed correct. Only since the early 1990's have these feeding trials been performed by reputable companies. Dr. Nemetz at The BIRD Clinic personally performed a comparative nutritional study and feeding trial in a breeding colony of Meyer's Parrots over a six-year period.

#### CONFINEMENT IN SMALL CAGES

An animal's nutritional status can be indirectly affected by continuous caging. An avoidance behavior pattern develops in which a bird shuns anything that is not familiar. Because of this, the bird rejects any new foods. In doing this, the bird clings to his narrow diet and is fearful of new foods which could help to balance his diet. This can be overcome by repeated offerings of these new foods in a similar location in the bird's cage over a two-week or longer period of time. This allows the bird an adjustment period to investigate the "new" cage item and has proven successful in the majority of cases. Owners simply need to be more patient and not give up!



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### FREE CHOICE FEEDING

Placing a variety of foods in a dish and letting birds eat free choice also can lead to problems. Birds have neither the instinct nor intelligence to pick a balanced diet from a selection of foods. When carefully feeding and caring for birds of the parrot family one notices that they have dietary "binges". That is, they will eat one food almost exclusively for a period of time and then without obvious reason switch to another food and eat it in preference to anything else. Partially because of inherited characteristics, and partially from acquired habits, birds can become locked into eating a narrow selection of foods. They will approach their food dish as if more concerned about what not to eat rather than what they should eat. Picking and pecking, spilling out, sorting through and finally selecting a food, makes up their daily routine. This highly undesirable situation fosters nutritional deficiencies in addition to wasting more food than they eat. Allowing a bird to eat in this manner virtually ensures nutritional problems. Unfortunately, these poor eating habits may go unrecognized when birds are allowed to eat free choice from a variety of foods constantly in front of them. Whether from being a picky eater or from *monophagism* (habitual eating of one kind of food), a bird eating mainly one food or ingredient receives too much of some nutrients and too little of others, causing body cells to suffer and even die.

### FAST METABOLIC RATE

Although pet and aviary birds spend many hours in cages, their metabolism and structure are that of a flying machine. Even when not active, they have a body with the capacity for tremendous and sustained power. A healthy bird burns a hot fire internally with an average core temperature of 105°F; manufactures more heat than any other vertebrate; consumes more oxygen; eats more food per unit weight; and moves more quickly. All of these factors confirm the unusually fast metabolism of a bird. Because of this fast metabolic rate, birds need to be fed a different diet than other animals. They require relatively large volumes of calorically dense, highly digestible food which constitutes a nutritionally complete diet. This instinctive need for energy is one reason birds will search out high calorie products like seeds and nuts, which are unfortunately not highly digestible or nutritionally complete. Compounding this problem is that the energy requirements of caged pet birds is much less than in their counterparts in the wild since they do not have to expend energy each day in search of food and water. Further, because of the large "turn over" in food daily (with food passing from mouth to feces in potentially less than three hours), what may be minor deficiencies in other animals become magnified into major deficiencies in birds. Try thinking of the bird as a super-athlete requiring a super-diet!

### CONCLUSION

Presently, many inaccurate, if not false, ideas still exist about the proper nutrition of pet birds. We do not yet have all the answers as there are over 50 species of birds common in the pet bird industry, but through constant research, observation and testing great strides have been made and will continue through time. **Health-wise, dependent on species, birds are at an advantage in eating a completely balanced, commercially formulated, pelleted diet 80-85% by volume of their total diet, with the remaining 15-20% as treats off of our table** – eggs, poultry, complex carbohydrates, vegetables, and some nuts or fruits. Table food is a necessary adjunct to a well-balanced diet. It adds interest, flavor, and freshness not found in commercially prepared food diets.

**One word of caution: Never abruptly remove any existing diet for a new diet assuming the bird will convert. Birds can die from starvation using this method.**

*This publication is part of The BIRD C News™ series to help educate bird owners. Produced by The BIRD Clinic Veterinary Corporation  
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