

**The Importance of a Quality Diet**  
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**Buy Smart and Clean Well**

Do you purchase seeds, seed mixes or pellets from open bins in pet or feed stores? Open bins may receive unwanted germs from the dust particles in the store. Dust particles from hamster and rat cages, as well as from bird cages, may end up in food bins. Customers' hands and clothing can deliver viral particles and germs from their birds at home. Toys and perches from bird marts also need disinfecting before use. Fresh fruits and vegetables from the grocery store need a thorough washing and rinsing, since they have been handled by many different hands, from the pickers in the fields to the clerks in the store. *E. coli* is ever-present, as is other bacteria, such as Enterobacter. Young companion birds are especially vulnerable to heavy bacterial contamination of foodstuffs since their abilities to deal with large amounts of bacteria is much less than that of older birds.

**Removing Pesticides from Foodstuffs**

Cleaning foodstuffs to remove pesticides and chemical residue is very important for exotic birds, since a bird's ability to tolerate pesticides is much less than that of humans. We have historical evidence of the dangers of pesticides, most notably DDT, dioxin, vinyl chloride, CFCs, chlordane and benzene. Recent information about the ever-present chemicals in our environment is not encouraging. Forty million tons of over 11,000 varieties of organochlorines are produced annually; we and our birds are breathing, eating and drinking these materials daily. These pesticides are so widespread that they are even found in the Arctic. High levels of organochlorines are associated with a high incidence of cancer. In order to reduce the risks associated with these chemicals, we need to carefully clean the fruits and vegetables we provide to our birds.

**Fat and Unhealthy**

A combination of a high-fat diet and lack of exercise can lead to an untimely demise for companion and breeding birds. Most parrot-type birds enjoy their food and relish sunflower and safflower seeds, as well as peanuts, French fries and pizza. Providing birds with an overly rich diet can lead to poor feather condition, excessive body fat and eventually fatty liver disease, thus shortening the life of the bird. There have been cases of pet Amazons with folds of fat hanging from their sides, many cockatoos with fatty tumors and even a fat Eclectus female that weighed more than 1,000 grams! Sometimes doting owners do not understand they are killing with kindness.

**Vitamins**

"If a little bit is good, a lot must be better." This commonly held idea is especially dangerous when it comes to vitamins. The knowledgeable bird owner provides an excellent diet, including a variety of fruits and vegetables, selected cooked foods, sprouted seeds and pellets. Adding vitamins to an excellent diet is dangerous. Pellets contain vitamins; if you are feeding pellets, you do not need to add additional vitamins. Many seed mixes have been treated with a vitamin coating; and many special bird treats also contain vitamins. When a bird ingests vitamins from all these sources, a chemical imbalance, or even vitamin toxicity, can occur. There have been cases where birds overdosed with vitamins have seizures and other cases where the birds exhibit repetitious muscle spasms of the feet or wings.

Some birds with chemical imbalances become feather pickers and when the diet is corrected, the feather picking stops. Avian medical researchers have written papers on the topic of vitamin toxicity. Vitamin use should be noted, monitored and never treated casually. Manufactured vitamins are man-made chemicals and not the same as those found in raw foods. At present, there are no formal established standards for recommended vitamin dosages for psittacines. Most research in this area has been performed on chickens and may or may not have relevance for exotic birds. Therefore, vitamin use requires caution and common sense. Check with your avian veterinarian before you add vitamins to a well-balanced diet for your birds.

**Birds Are What They Eat**

Often said about the foods humans consume, "you are what you eat," can also be said about the foods our companion and breeding birds eat. Not only is the health of the individual bird dependent in great part

upon a proper diet, but the fertility of eggs, the viability of the embryos and the health of future youngsters are dependent upon the basic good health of the two parent birds.

Different species require different diets. It is incumbent upon the diet manager for the birds to research the needs of the species, and make every effort to provide companion birds and breeding birds with what they need. Each seed, vegetable, root, tuber, fruit and leafy vegetable provides a unique combination of vitamins and minerals; that is why variety in the diet is so important.

Providing manufactured pellets as an addition to the diet of psittacines is practiced by many bird breeders. Pellets are designed to provide as close to what is deemed to be a balanced diet for psittacines as possible. Extensive research was conducted at the University of California at Davis by Tom Roudybush, professor Dick Grau and their colleagues on the nutritional needs of psittacines. It is of interest that the studies carried out at UC Davis on the orange-winged Amazon diet during the breeding season indicated that the birds were more productive when fruits and vegetables were provided in addition to pellets.

The Department of Avian Sciences at UC Davis publishes the *Exotic Bird Report* quarterly. This seven-page report contains excellent information on exotic birds including nutrition, behavior, development, nest box design, genetics and exotic bird studies on the neotropical parrots. The report is sent to those who contribute funds to the Psittacine Research Project, Department of Avian Sciences, UC Davis, 95616-8532, USA. Write for further information or visit the Psittacine Research Project's web site at <http://etx.ucdavis.edu/avs/avspstt.htm>

#### **Soaked and Sprouted Seeds**

Many bird farmers provide a variety of soft foods, including soaked and sprouted seeds and legumes, leafy greens, fruits, and vegetables. Sprouted seeds have undergone changes that increase the available nutrients. If you suddenly find your seeds are not sprouting, check with your supplier. You may discover the producing company is sterilizing the seed to prevent sprouting as a means of stopping the potential use of the seeds by other grocers. You may have to request your supplier to find another source of seeds that are not sterilized.

#### **Cleanliness of Bird Foods is Imperative**

Packaging, handling, storing and preparing foodstuffs for birds can impact their health. Most successful bird breeders are already utilizing effective ways to safely handle foods for their birds. The question is whether or not the breeders are informing their clients of critical aspects of food purchasing, preparation, storage and handling. Recent cases of *E. coli* contamination of ground beef, *Salmonella* contamination of chicken and other bacterial contaminants in fruits give cause for concern. How many pet owners chop their birds' fruits and vegetables on the same cutting board used to cut up chicken or fish without properly cleaning and disinfecting it with a chlorine solution? Bacteria live in the tiny cuts in plastic and wood cutting boards, and can be transferred from the board to the chopped foods prepared for the birds. A wise move is to purchase a cutting board specifically used to prepare foods for birds. If bird food is prepared in the area where meats are handled, use chlorine bleach on all work surfaces.

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