

FEEDING A CANARY

General Information

Our knowledge of bird nutrition is constantly evolving. This is due to heightened awareness of the importance of nutrition plus increased research. As with all other animals, birds need a proper balance of carbohydrates, proteins, fat, vitamins, minerals and water. Different species of birds often require different foods.

Should I be concerned about what my Canary eats?

Nutrition is commonly neglected with pet birds. Too often owners assume they are feeding a proper diet to their Canary when in fact they are not. This is a common reason for many health problems. It is important to continually strive to improve your bird's diet. This involves constantly educating yourself and a certain degree of **common sense**. It is insufficient to feed a Canary just to maintain life; instead, your goal should be to help it thrive and flourish. Your bird's health depends on how well it is fed.

Discuss nutrition with your veterinarian!

What does my Canary naturally eat?

Canaries are generally seed eaters and consume a variety of seeds (grass seeds). Since season dictates seed availability, there are times of the year when insects and certain fruits, berries and vegetation will constitute the bulk of the diet. Canaries are vulnerable to obesity and related problems.

A well balanced and varied diet must be maintained at all times.

What should I feed my Canary?

Seeds

Wild Canaries would eat a great variety of seed types in the wild as different plants come into season. Commercial seed mixes may contain from 2 - 5 different kinds of seeds. They tend to be high in fat and carbohydrates and provide a decreased or imbalanced source of many nutrients that could lead to ill health and potentially shorten the life of your Canary. The problem is, Canaries tend to selectively eat only 1 or 2 of its *favorite* types of seed. Millet seed is often chosen preferentially. Owners will also offer a *millet spray* or branch. This, of course, is more of the *same* seed and leads to further malnutrition. *Honey Sticks* are often offered but once again contain *more* seed stuck together with sugar and honey. *Molting foods*, *song foods* and *conditioning foods* are also available. These products are simply different combinations of more *seeds* that really have no particular bearing on the condition being catered to. Healthy molts, vibrant song and strong condition is achieved with a balanced diet all of the time. Seeds are highly palatable, preferentially sought after but nutritionally they are like giving candy to a child.



Seeds should only be a small part of a balanced diet but should never **be** the entire diet. Gradually offer fewer seeds and your bird will start eating other foods more.

How much do I offer?

As a guideline, most Canaries can be maintained on 1 - 2 level measure teaspoons of seeds per bird, per day in a shallow dish depending on the size of the bird. If there is more than one Canary in the cage, separate dishes should be used for each bird to ensure those birds at the bottom of the **pecking order** have a chance to eat. This may not be possible in a flock situation. Any seeds left over in the dish at the end of the day could suggest that too many seeds were offered originally.

Pelleted Diets

Pellets have been developed, to meet all your bird's nutritional needs. Mature Canaries are particularly troublesome to convert to a pelleted diet. Different formulations are available for different life stages and for the management of certain diseases. Hand raised babies are the easiest to start on a pelleted diet. **Pellets are the ideal diet**, therefore you are encouraged to slowly wean *seed eating* birds onto a pelleted diet. Pellets should ideally represent approximately 75-80% of the bird's diet. There are many good brands of pelleted foods in the market place. Pellets come in different flavors, colors and shapes.



How do I convert my bird to a pelleted diet?

Converting seed eating birds (**seed-aholics**) onto a formulated diet is not always easy. Initially, pellets are not likely even identified as food. Slowly wean the bird off seeds over a period of 4-8 weeks while having pellets constantly available in a separate dish. Some people mix the pellets in a reduced amount of seed to aid its acceptance in the cage, but be aware, the bird will not accidentally eat a pellet. It may take days, weeks or months to modify a bird's diet. **NEVER** withdraw seeds entirely without first being certain the bird is eating the pellets plus some fruits and vegetables. Birds are stubborn, but can be trained. This can be a stressful time for you and your Canary.

Consult your veterinarian if encountering any problems with this transformation or the health of the bird.

Remember that you train the bird, do not let it train you.

Fruits and Vegetables

Fruits, vegetables and greens should account for approximately 20 - 25% of the daily diet. Pale vegetables, with a high water composition (i.e. Iceberg or Head lettuce, celery) offer very little nutritional value. **Avocado is reported to be potentially toxic.**

Fruits and vegetables must be washed thoroughly to remove chemicals. Cut them into manageable pieces depending on the size of the bird. It is not necessary to take the skin off. Offer fruits and vegetables in a separate dish. If your bird appears to develop a particular fancy for one food item, reduce the volume or stop feeding it temporarily to promote the eating of other foods.

Treat your bird like a small child; offer a small piece of a variety of food items daily and never stop trying.

Water

Fresh clean water must be available at all times. Depending on the quality of your tap water, consider the use of bottled water. Dishes must be cleaned thoroughly every day with soap and water.

What about people food?

As a general rule any wholesome, nutritious food that you and your family eat, your bird can eat. Follow the general guidelines discussed above and use your *common sense*. Some birds even enjoy a small amount of lean cooked meat, fish, egg or cheese occasionally. Dairy products should be consumed in moderation. It is common sense that *junk food*, chocolate, products containing caffeine and alcoholic beverages be avoided.

Will my bird have any different needs throughout its life?

Birds that are extremely young, stressed, injured, laying eggs or raising young may have certain special requirements. There are specially formulated pelleted foods available for birds with specific nutritional requirements. Consult your veterinarian regarding these situations.



Do I need to use a vitamin-mineral mixture?

Does your bird need extra vitamins, minerals or amino-acids? The powdered supplements are often regarded as more stable. Mix these supplements in water or preferably apply directly onto moist food. Placing these powders on seeds or dried foods is of little value since it will ultimately end up on the bottom of the food dish and not in the bird. One opinion suggests that a bird eating 75 - 80% of its diet in the form of pelleted food may not need supplements. Specific vitamins or minerals may be more important at various times during a bird's life (e.g. egg laying requires calcium supplementation). Calcium supplements are available if your Canary is determined to be deficient.

Your veterinarian can help you assess your bird's diet and its particular needs.

Does my bird need gravel or grit?

Controversy exists over the need for gravel. It was believed that grit was necessary for the mechanical breakdown of food in the gizzard as an aid to digestion. Birds do fine without grit. Some birds will in fact have problems if grit is over eaten.

Tips

Always monitor the amount of food eaten every day by each bird.

Offer fresh water every day.

Offer a variety of fresh foods every day.

Offer fresh fruits and vegetables every day

Clean all food and water dishes daily.

No to a food item one day does not mean **no forever** - KEEP TRYING!

Some suggested food items include:

apple

apricots

asparagus

banana

beans (cooked)

such as:

chic peas

kidney

lentils

lima

mung

navy

soy
beet
blueberry
broccoli
brussel sprouts
cabbage
cantaloupe
carrot
carrot tops
cherries (not the pit)
Chinese vegetables (bok
choy)
coconut
corn
cucumber
dates
dandelion leaves

dates
endive
fig
grapes
grapefruit
kale
kiwi
melons
mango
nectarines
orange
papaya
parsnip
peaches
pear
peas
peppers (red/green & hot)

pineapple
plum
pomegranate
potato
pumpkin
rappini
raspberry
rice (brown)
romaine lettuce
spinach
sprouted seeds
squash
strawberry
sweet potato
tomato
zucchini

*This client information sheet is based on material written by Rick Axelson, DVM & Shawn Messonier, DVM
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