Switching from a Seed-based Diet to a Pelleted Diet

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Switching your psittacine bird (bird from the parrot family) from a seed-based diet to a quality commercial food will take some time and patience, but is well worth the effort. Your bird will be happier and healthier.

Consult with your veterinarian

Perhaps you are changing your bird's diet on the recommendation of your veterinarian, or maybe you have decided on your own to convert to a formulated diet. If so, have your veterinarian examine your bird to make sure he is otherwise healthy and able to handle the diet change. Also be sure to discuss any special dietary considerations your specific species of bird may have. If your bird is overweight, your veterinarian will be able to tell you what her optimal weight should be.

Determine the appropriate "pelleted" diet

Formulated diets actually come in the form of pellets, crumbles, or nuggets. They are readily available from many reputable manufacturers, pet stores, Internet retailers, and veterinarians, and include Harrison's, Zupreem, and Roudybush. There are commercial foods for different species, so be sure to select the one appropriate for your bird. Some avian diets have higher fat levels that are suitable for many macaws and Golden conures, whereas others may be lower in fat and higher in protein to provide better nutrition for cockatoos and Amazons. Ask your veterinarian if you are unsure of which formulation to use.

It is often very helpful to buy small quantities of several brands and mix them together as you attempt converting the bird to the new diet. Some birds prefer large brightly colored pellets, while others do better with a formulated diet that is in very small pieces. You will need to work with your bird to find out which one(s) she likes.

Determine your bird's intake

It is generally helpful to have an idea of how much your bird normally eats. Before switching your bird to a commercial formula, you may want to determine the average amount your bird eats per day. Each morning, measure out and record the amount of seed you place into your bird's clean food dish. The next morning, measure how much is left. Subtract that amount from what you had placed in the dish, to determine how much your bird ate. Repeat this procedure for a week. At the end of the week (7 days), add the daily amounts eaten and then divide that amount by 7 to determine the average daily intake. (If your bird flings much of her seed out of her cage, you will need to take that into account.)

Determine your bird's weight

Since your bird may be reluctant to eat the new diet, it is important that he does not lose too much weight too fast. The best way to monitor this is to purchase a small scale that weighs in grams. Weigh your bird for two weeks at the same time every day before starting the switch to the new diet, and then daily during the switch. Your bird should not lose more than 1-2% of his body weight per week. If he does, contact your veterinarian. Weighing your bird regularly after the diet switch will help you fine tune the amount you are feeding, and also alert you to weight changes that could indicate an illness.

The conversion process

There are several methods used to convert a bird from a seed to a formulated diet, depending somewhat on the species and personality of the individual bird. Some birds will convert easily - within a week. For others, though, it may take several months. The length of time it takes for the conversion is not as important as the change itself.

Converting smaller ground foraging birds
Cockatiels, budgies, and other birds that normally forage on the ground in the wild can often be converted using the following technique. To use this method, it is important for the bird to be unafraid of you and to have her wings clipped.

To use this method, move the bird to a quiet area. Spread out a mixture of 2-3 brands of pellets on a flat surface, such as a light-colored towel. Sit down next to the area so that you are not towering over your bird. "Peck" at the pellets with your fingers, looking intently at the pellets. Don't try to obviously get the bird to try the pellets, or verbally coax him. Just "accidentally" bump a few items towards the bird, and keep foraging with your fingers. From time to time, click your fingernails together, reproducing the sound of food being consumed. After 1/2 hour, most birds will be pecking at the pellets. You can also do this with another family member present, and have a nice conversation while you are "foraging." The less you focus on the bird, the better.

Converting larger birds
Again, this technique requires some bird psychology, so it is important that your bird enjoys your company and will take "cues" from you. If your bird is afraid of you or cannot follow simple commands like "step-up," you need to improve your relationship before using this method.

*Unauthorized use of any images, thumbnails, illustrations, descriptions, article content, or registered trademarks of **Foster & Smith, Inc.** is strictly prohibited under copyright law. Site content, including photography, descriptions, pricing, promotions, and availability are subject to change without notice. These restrictions are necessary in order to protect not only our copyrighted intellectual property, but also the health of pets, since articles or images that are altered or edited after download could result in misinformation that may harm companion animals, aquatic life, or native species.*

Bring your bird to a training perch, and set out some pellets. Act like you are nibbling on them and really like them. Tell the bird that the pellets are really good, and make sounds to communicate your satisfaction with them. Give the impression that they are so good you don't want to share them, but then ultimately relent.

Tips for converting to pelleted diets

Just as human parents use "tricks" to get their children to eat new foods, a little psychology can help convince your bird to try the new diet.

- Experiment with placement of the pellets. Some birds prefer eating from the highest bowl first, and others prefer eating at the bottom of the cage.
- Allow the bird to see another healthy bird eating the pellets.
- If your bird likes certain fruits or vegetables, (try cooked yams or high moisture fruits) you can try sprinkling some seed on that food. Then try sprinkling pellets. Remember to remove the food after 4-6 hours so it does not spoil.
- Once the bird is eating some pellets, offer the new pelleted food in the morning when the bird is the most hungry. Add the seed later in the day, or for only several 15-minute feedings per day. (Smaller birds need regular access to food, so consult with your veterinarian before limiting the times food is available.)
- At the beginning of the conversion process, some prefer switching this schedule, and offering seed in the morning, with a separate dish for pellets. During late morning and early afternoon, take out the seeds, leaving the pellet dish. At evening, put the seed dish back in the cage and leave it throughout the night. Since many birds primarily eat in the morning and night, they are able to eat their normal diet at these times, but if they want anything in-between, their only choice is to eat pellets.
- Grind the pellets in a blender, add some water, and mix some millet (or other favorite food) into this mash. The bird will have to go through the mash to get his favored food. This works well with smaller species such as budgies, lovebirds and cockatiels. Again, remove the mash after several hours to prevent spoilage.
- Provide pellets when the bird is outside of the cage. He may start relating the pellets to having fun!
- Mix pellets with shredded newspaper or very small toys, like wooden buttons. This may help mimic normal foraging behavior.
- Be consistent and persistent.
- Be sure to change the pellets in the dish daily, so they are always fresh.

Note: Once a bird begins eating pellets, the droppings will usually change from green to a brownish color. They may also become a little looser due to the extra water the bird drinks while eating a pelleted diet.

Tips for feeding fruits and vegetables

Try the tips mentioned above, plus:

- Eat the fruit or vegetable in front of the bird and offer a small taste.
- Choose highly colored foods at first.
- Cut the food into very small pieces.
- Tuck the food in a top corner of the cage, in a toy, or next to a mirror in the cage, as an enticement.
- For a bird who likes water, attach a wet piece of romaine lettuce or other green to the cage. The water may attract the bird.
- Some birds may prefer vegetables in a liquid form, at first. Try carrot juice.

Converting your bird from a seed-based diet to a formulated diet is one of the most important things you can do for the life and health of your bird. If you have determination and patience, you have a great chance of success.

*Unauthorized use of any images, thumbnails, illustrations, descriptions, article content, or registered trademarks of **Foster & Smith, Inc.** is strictly prohibited under copyright law. Site content, including photography, descriptions, pricing, promotions, and availability are subject to change without notice. These restrictions are necessary in order to protect not only our copyrighted intellectual property, but also the health of pets, since articles or images that are altered or edited after download could result in misinformation that may harm companion animals, aquatic life, or native species.*