

# Veterinary Viewpoints

Edited by Amy B. Worell, DVM, DABVP-Avian  
West Hills, California

**Question #1:** My pet parakeet is about 8 years old and eats seed. We have recently found out that seed diets are unhealthy and that pelleted diet should be given. With my bird being so old, is it still safe to switch?

*D. Sutherland, Kansas*

**Answer #1:** Seed diets are not "unhealthy" but are not well balanced. They are high in oils and carbohydrates and deficient in proteins, calcium, and vitamins. It would be worth trying to improve your bird's diet. Pelleted diets are an effort at producing well-balanced foods. Even these should be supplemented with some vegetables and fruit. Converting birds to better diets can be accomplished but the switch must be done slowly.

*James M. Harris, DVM  
Tasmania, Australia*

**Answer #2:** I assume your pet parakeet is a budgerigar. There are many different parakeet species, but the budgerigar is commonly called a parakeet. These birds can live into their teens, so it is worth improving the nutritional plane of your bird to help him live longer and feel better. Converting your bird to pellets at this age is a challenge, but it can be done successfully as long as you are careful and patient. We usually start the conversion process by mixing the pellets 50:50 with the seed for at least two weeks. This is when the bird starts to recognize the pellet as food since it is mixed with the seed. He will touch it and throw it out of the dish, but probably will not eat it. After the introduction, then we

remove the seed for 1-2 days (no millet or seed treat either) and just have pellets in the dish. He can have fruits, vegetables and table food during this time, just no seed. Watch the droppings to see if he is eating enough. Make sure they are normal in number and substance. If he is not eating the pellets after two days, mix again the seed and pellet for another two weeks and try again. It can take up to a year to get a bird converted to pellets, so do not give up after one try. After the bird is converted, I still give a small amount of seed 2-3 times a week for the small birds, but the majority of the diet is pellets.

*Rhoda Stevenson, DVM, DABVP-Avian  
Jacksonville, Florida*

**Answer #3:** I strongly think that feeding a bird pellets is the single most important thing that one can do for a pet or aviary bird. I equate feeding seeds to eating a fast food diet for life and expecting to be healthy. It just won't happen! Recent work with fast food diets, for example, demonstrates that the child population of this country is becoming obese which is linked to the high fat content of these foods. Similarly is the case with high fat seed diets that are offered many parrots. We rarely see in the clinic sick birds that are being fed pellets and almost always see sick birds that are on seed diets. Even when the seed diet is partially composed of table food, these types of diets have been shown to be not nutritionally sound and a poor plane of nutrition for our feathered friends. All birds will switch to pellets. I find that most will convert within a three week time

period. This of course if accomplished with a gradual switch from all seeds to all pellets. I find that parrot type birds switch to pellets faster if they are simultaneously offered a soft food bean mixture. With the lifespan of budgies approaching 15 years, a 8 year old budgie is not too old to be converted to a more nutritional diet.

*Amy B Worell, DVM, DABVP-Avian  
West Hills, CA*

**Question #2:** My 3 year old sever macaw was finally diagnosed after 8 months of tests, as having diabetes. Can you tell me how his life will be? My vet is not familiar with diabetes in birds and tells me that it is rare. His blood sugar has ranged from 70 to 1000. He drinks constantly; acts like he is starving and his poops are hard to mop up. It is very sticky and I can tell it has a lot of sugar in it. He has eaten nothing but Zupreen pellets all his life. He is scheduled to be started on insulin injections next week. Please help me understand this disease in my beloved pet.

*Smith, Alabama*

**Answer #1:** Diabetes is a disease where the body is unable to metabolize blood sugar in a normal manor. A hormone, insulin, produced by the pancreas is needed to utilize blood sugar. If there is inadequate insulin, blood glucose levels elevate and when high enough spill out through the urinary tract. If blood glucose levels remain elevated for a long time the patient is prone to infections, cataracts and liver disease. If not controlled, diabetes can lead to premature death. Some diabetics can be stabilized with oral medication and some with injections. It will take a dedicated effort on your part with the help of your veterinarian to control this disease.

*James M. Harris, DVM  
Tasmania, Australia*

**Answer #2:** Diabetes mellitus in a granivorous (grain eating) bird is more frustrating than managing a carnivorous (meat eating) animal because it has been demonstrated that it is usually too much glucagon hormone rather than not enough insulin that causes the problem. Glucagon works opposite of insulin but the end result is the same symptoms as you have described. Treating with insulin will be helpful, but sometimes it is difficult to get long-term regulation. You can also use glypizide, an oral medication, to decrease the blood glucose. Careful monitoring is the key to success. You need to be aware of the symptoms of insulin shock, which can be threatening if the blood glucose is too low. The bird may become

weak and wobbly, stare into space, have a seizure or go into a coma. If you notice these symptoms, you need to give the bird some honey or syrup to raise the blood sugar and then make sure the bird eats something. Keep good records on amount and time the insulin is given and when and what the bird eats. Stay in close touch with your veterinarian, as many of the principles of diabetes management are the same in all species.

*Rhoda Stevenson, DVM, DABVP-Avian  
Jacksonville, Florida*

**Answer #3:** Diabetes mellitus in birds is an uncommon but not rare condition that is identified in a number of species. Even though the

hormone insulin appears not to be the primary culprit, many birds do respond to insulin injections and some to a diet change. Many birds may lead a normal and full life as a diabetic; others may have a shortened life span. Monitoring diabetic birds is nowhere to the stage as it is with people or even dogs and cats. Having and treating a diabetic bird can be time consuming and somewhat costly if the bird requires multiple trips to the veterinarian for care and adjustments. A close relationship to your avian veterinarian and patience are needed to successfully treat a bird with diabetes.

*Amy B. Worell, DVM, DABVP-Avian  
West Hills, CA* ❖



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