

Veterinary Viewpoints

Edited by Amy Worell, DVM, ABVP
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Question #1: Pelleted diets for parrots seem to be the talked about subject at our bird club. Are these diets really better than seed diets and which ones are the best?

B. Lockwood, California

Answer #1: The only birds with known detailed nutritional information are domestic poultry. Almost anything is better than seed diets. Seeds are deficient in protein, calcium, and vitamin A. Pelleted foods have these nutrients in their composition. All the seeds available in our country are native to North America. Since most parrots are South American, African, or Asian species, these seed diets are quite artificial. Some parrots have very specialized diets, most are opportunistic scavengers eating anything that is available within their habitat. Although pelleted diets are also artificial they are infinitely better than seed diets and are more convenient to feed than fresh foods. There are many brands available today.

*James M. Harris, DVM
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Answer #2: One must remember that there has been little research in exotic avian nutrition. We simply do not know what the exact requirements are for the multitude of species. Intuitively, seed diets do not favor comparably to pelleted diets as they are high in fat, lack protein, are deficient in certain vitamins and minerals, such as calcium. Pelleted foods on the other hand contain "our best guess" as to what psittacines require and meet the requirements for domestic avian species. Certain species, such as macaws, may require the higher fat in seeds and may not react favorably to the high mineral and protein content in some of the pelleted feeds. Cockatiels also can develop kidney disease or polyuria (excess urine production) when on a pelleted feed. Some of these same birds when switched to a seed-based diet will improve. Manufacturers have reacted to these problems by lowering protein, minerals, and vitamins in some diets. Given the uncertainty of each individual species requirements, the safest road may indicate feeding two types of pelleted feeds along with some seeds as treats, fruits and vegetables, and ample table foods (breads, pasta, chicken, rice, beans, etc.). On such a diet the owner should insure that the bird consumes large proportion of pelleted feeds. There is no evidence other than anecdotal experience as to which pellet is better, although some birds certainly have preferences. The best course is to use diets that have proven safe and effective in the past of other bird owners and to not use foods beyond the manufacturers recommended shelf life.

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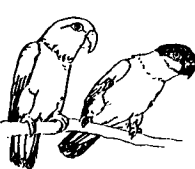
Answer #3: Just as kibbled dog food replaced homemade diets for dogs, pelleted diets have become the standard for parrots, replacing the widely used seed diets. Pellets foods have been offered to chickens for many, many years and have long been the standard in the

poultry industry. They have been readily available for parrots for approximately 15 years, with many new manufacturers being added in recent years. Pelleted diets potentially can offer a parrot the needed nutrients for a long and full, nutritionally balanced life. As there are numerous species of parrots, it also seems logical that the nutritional requirements for a number of the species may not have been met with a certain pelleted ration. Hence, the need to offer both pellets free choice and a variety of fresh foods on a daily basis. I personally recommend pellets and a commercially available soybean mixture as the basis for a nutritionally sound diet. To this, I recommend that a variety of table foods be offered. As a general rule, I think that if a food is nutritionally sound for people, then the food is acceptable for parrots. This of course excludes food items such as sweet rolls and french fries. In addition to a variety of foodstuff being offered to parrots in attempt to better meet their potentially varied nutritional needs, I think the intellectual stimuli that the variety of foodstuffs presents to the parrots, is good for their mental well-being.

Seed diets, in my opinion, regardless of the seed composition, are a nutritionally unsound diet for parrots. I feel that feeding a parrot a seed diet is like you and I eating only fast food meals for years and expecting to be healthy as a result. Nutritional deficiencies and excesses tend to slowly affect the body and it may take years for signs of chronic malnutrition and subsequent disease related to a nutritionally inadequate diet to become apparent.

In terms of recommendations as to which pellets to offer, I would suggest that you stick with a company that has a long history of nutritional research with parrots and ideally one that continues to maintain a population of breeding parrots for continued research and improvement of the diet.

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