

# BASIC CARE FOR COMPANION BIRDS

## INTRODUCTION

People have kept companion birds for centuries, enjoying their companionship, beauty, and mimicry. Some companion birds, however, have shortened lives due to poor nutrition or care in captivity. Many of the species kept can live for a long time, however, if not properly fed or taken care of, they may die prematurely. Below is a short list of essential elements to consider when choosing the best diet and habitat for your feathered companion(s).

## A Diet That Will Promote Health

Years of experience and clinical research have shown that meeting a bird's caloric needs does not ensure it is receiving a healthful diet. The practice of feeding a seed and grain diet, though inexpensive and common, continues to result in malnutrition. Like fast food diets in people, seed diets are high in fat and low in the vitamins, minerals, and protein that birds need to stay healthy. While birds can survive temporarily on seed diets, chronic malnutrition will compromise their immune and other systems and they will get sick.

Proper diet is critical for overall health in every species, birds included. The easiest way to feed a balanced diet is to use commercial formulated diets especially made for your type of pet bird. Pelleted diets are specifically formulated to meet the nutritional needs of your bird. They contain the right balance of vitamins, minerals, protein, carbohydrates, and fats that your bird requires for optimal health. There are several different pellets available at your local pet store or veterinary clinic. Ask your veterinarian which type of pelleted diet is best for your bird. One caveat to the pelleted diet recommendation is that small parrot species, especially budgerigars, but also parrotlets, lovebirds and cockatiels, can have kidney problems on a pelleted-only diet; for these species we recommend free choice pellets plus meal feeding some seeds each day. For other species, seeds and nuts should be reserved as treats. **Converting your bird from a seed-based diet to a pellet-based diet can be tricky and should be performed with the help of your avian veterinarian.** Homemade diets can be considered; however, they are time consuming and should be developed with the aid of a professional nutritionist.

Most birds enjoy eating fresh foods in addition to their pellets. It is okay to feed most healthy low-fat, low-salt items to your bird with the focus on healthy vegetables and fruits. Foods that are toxic to your bird and must be avoided include chocolate, alcohol, caffeine, avocado, and highly salted foods. It is important to wash fruits and vegetables carefully before feeding them to your bird. The practice of feeding cooked food should only be employed if uneaten food can be removed within one hour due to the risk of foodborne illness. Lories, lorikeets and other nectar-eating birds require fresh unspoiled nectar that is replaced often. While

healthy table foods can add interest and diversion at meal times, they should be considered treats and make up 25% or less of your bird's diet.

It is important that your bird have access to clean water at all times. Water dishes need to be washed daily with soap and hot water or run through a dishwasher; just rinsing out dishes with water is not adequate to remove colonized bacteria. Unless otherwise directed by your veterinarian, do not put vitamins, supplements, or juice in your bird's water, as this encourages bacterial growth and may make the water unpalatable.



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## A Clean, Safe Enclosure

All pet birds need a clean and safe place to call home. Cages should be constructed of materials that cannot be damaged or eaten by their inhabitants. As birds will often chew their enclosures, all materials used in construction should be nontoxic. Bar spacing should be such that your bird cannot fit its head through the cage bars. Cages should have a grate on the bottom to allow fecal material and uneaten food to pass through, with the floor far enough below the grate to prevent access to waste. Newspapers, paper towels or other plain cage liner papers are preferred over wood chips, chopped corn cobs, or kitty litter. Cage papers should be changed daily both for cleanliness and so you can monitor your bird's droppings.

Confined birds will appreciate having as much room as you can provide. While the minimum acceptable cage size is one that allows a bird to fully extend its wings, more is better when it comes to space. Outside aviaries should be partially sheltered to furnish protection from wind and rain, and constructed in such a way as to protect occupants from pests and predators. Ideally, galvanized wire should not be used as it contains high concentrations of zinc which poses a toxicity risk if ingested. A two-door system is safest for flighted birds housed outdoors.

Perches can either be purchased or made of clean, pesticide-free natural wood branches. Perches provide a place to stand, and something fun to chew on. Place widely-spaced perches on opposite sides of the cage for species that like to fly or hop, such as finches and toucans. More perches can be provided for agile climbers such as parrots. Make sure that the perches are not located in such a way that droppings fall into water dishes, or tails rub against the side of the cage. Proper perch sizes will vary depending on the size of your bird's feet; in general, your bird's foot should encircle 2/3 to 3/4 of the perch's circumference. Wooden dowel perches of unvarying diameter can create painful lesions on the bottom of your bird's feet, and should not be the only type of perch available. Natural branch, sisal rope, or perches of varying diameter are preferred. Sandpaper perch covers can create painful sores and should never be used.

A healthy bird can tolerate temperatures that are comfortable to its owner. There is no need to overheat your home for your bird's sole benefit; however, rapid or frequent temperature changes can be stressful to your pet so try to avoid this. Similarly, pet birds can adapt to a wide range of humidity levels. In dry climates regular bathing will help keep your bird's feathers in good condition.

## Clean, Fresh Air to Breathe

Birds have much more sensitive respiratory systems than do humans. Certain airborne toxins that are relatively safe for humans can cause illness or even death in our feathered friends. Overheated non-stick surfaces containing Teflon, such as those found on cookware, drip pans, irons, and self-cleaning ovens, can emit odorless fumes that are rapidly fatal to birds. Other sources of toxic fumes include spray pesticides, paints and sealants, rug cleaners, wood smoke, air fresheners, incense, scented candles, hair sprays, perfumes, cleaning products, and burning plastics. Cigarette smoke is also hazardous to birds. This list is not exhaustive, so be aware that in general, anything that gives off strong fumes or smoke is a potential hazard to your pet.

Although you may have heard that birds can die from drafts, healthy birds can tolerate drafts without any problems. Birds have evolved outdoors in the wind and rain, and fresh air and good ventilation are important to their health. If it is too cold, hot, or polluted to open your windows, consider using a HEPA air filter to clean your indoor air. Ensuring good air quality is especially important if you own dusty birds like cockatoos and African grey parrots; the particulate debris naturally produced by their feathers can cause respiratory irritation for both themselves and others.

## A Good Night's Sleep

Most pet birds are diurnal species, meaning that they get up at dawn and settle in to sleep at dusk. Exposing companion birds to artificially long days via household lights or televisions can result in sleep deprivation, which compromises your bird's health. If your bird is normally located in a room in which people stay up late, consider putting a sleeping cage in a quieter part of your home for night time use. Most birds do best with 10-12 hours of sleep a night.



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## Physical Activity and Mental Stimulation

Birds are some of nature's greatest athletes, and exercise is a daily part of their life in the wild. Although some pet birds can be safely allowed to fly in a home environment, others cannot due to physical limitations or an inability to keep a flighted bird safe. Exercise is essential for maintaining healthy cardiovascular and respiratory systems, as well as healthy bones and muscles. Therefore, for those birds which do not fly, alternate methods of exercise need to be provided.

In addition, most pet birds are highly intelligent animals, and require mental and social stimulation for optimum health. Many activities that provide exercise, such as toys to play with or wood to chew, can also provide them with enjoyment and satisfaction.

### Toys

Play is important in many of our birds' lives. Toys can provide play opportunities in addition to exercise, however they must be selected with the safety of the bird in mind. "Chewable" items such as branches, pine cones, natural fiber rope, and soft white pine are often enjoyed by parrots. Other engaging activities such as problem-solving toys, foraging toys, and foot toys are enjoyed by many birds. A piece of corn on the cob or pomegranate can be a fun thing to destroy while also providing a snack. Unsafe toys include those that contain lead, or soft plastics that can be chewed and swallowed. Hard plastic toys, like those made of acrylic, are generally safe. Since all birds are different, it is important that you watch how your bird plays with its toys to determine what is likely to be safe.

### Training

When done properly, training can be a very rewarding experience for both owners and their birds. Many of our companion birds are extremely intelligent and training is a chance for them to exercise their minds as well as their bodies. The AAV strongly recommends reward-based training methods over forced or punishment-based training methods; forcing birds to do things and punishing birds for undesired behaviors are harmful to the human-bird bond and will cause fear and aggression in our companion birds. You can train your bird to do silly behaviors such as dunk a tiny basketball in a hoop or useful behaviors such as calmly tolerating being wrapped in a towel to be examined by your avian veterinarian. There are many training opportunities available; some recommended options and resources include:

- Good Bird, Inc. ([www.goodbirdinc.com](http://www.goodbirdinc.com))
- Clicker training for birds
- The International Association of Avian Trainers and Educators (<https://iaate.org/>)

- Training classes may be available through local bird stores or your avian veterinarian
- Training your parrot to forage for food: ask your avian veterinarian for AAV's "Captive Foraging" handout and watch the video found here: <https://www.avianstudios.com/captive-foraging-dvd/>

### Social Opportunities

Many species of birds are social by nature and enjoy time as part of a flock. Smaller birds such as canaries, finches, and budgerigars can often be kept together in a large cage providing social interactions with their kind. Larger birds are usually housed separately from each other but can still enjoy having other birds in the environment. Often, the humans in the home are the bird's "flock" so we need to make sure they are truly part of the family. Rather than petting your bird excessively, as this can be interpreted as mating behavior, we recommend including your bird in daily activities, providing foraging opportunities, and working on trick training with your bird.

### Flight

For some birds, supervised flight in the home is an option. If a bird is permitted to fly, you as its owner must remain aware of and mitigate any potential risks. Trauma can occur from flying into ceiling fans, mirrors, or windows, burns can occur from hot pans on the stove, and drowning can occur when toilet seats are left up. In addition, open doors and windows present a very real risk of losing your bird forever. On the other hand, with some birds you may need to protect your home from your bird, or risk having your dining room chairs reduced to matchsticks!

If your bird spends time out of its cage and the above level of supervision is not practical, you might want to consider keeping your bird's wings trimmed. Trimming feathers hurts no more than a haircut, and the clipped feathers will fall out and be replaced during the next molt cycle. An appropriate wing trim should allow your bird to glide safely to the ground but not fly. However, trimming a bird's wings prevents the bird from engaging in a normal behavior and a good source of exercise; discussing the advantages and disadvantages of wing trimming with your avian veterinarian will help you to make the best decision for your bird. Wing trimming is not allowed in some countries; your veterinarian can guide you on local laws.

Whether a bird is flighted or its wings are trimmed, your bird needs to be supervised when out of the cage; they are excellent at getting into trouble!

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## Regular Bathing

Many avian species are made for wind and rain. Regular baths or showers are important for the health of your bird's feathers, skin, and sinuses. Some birds prefer baths, others prefer misting, and still others prefer taking showers with their owners. Experiment with your bird, and find a solution that fits both your needs; if your bird is fearful of bathing, ask your avian veterinarian for training suggestions to overcome this fear. As long as they are not fearful of this activity, birds should be bathed or showered a minimum of one to two times a week, even in the winter months.

## Medical Check-up and Regular Grooming

New birds should visit an avian veterinarian as soon after purchase as possible. Afterwards, routine visits help detect signs of illness early and keep birds healthy. Signs of sickness in birds can be subtle. A few common signs include reduced appetite and activity level, sitting fluffed and sleeping more than usual, sneezing, yawning, regurgitating food, or having diarrhea. When in doubt as to whether your bird needs medical attention, call your avian veterinary clinic for advice. See AAV's "Signs of Illness in Companion Birds" handout for more information.

Routine grooming consists of nail trims and, if desired, wing trims. For healthy birds, nails are trimmed as needed when they become too sharp or too long.

## AAV: Setting a Standard in Avian Care Since 1980

Avian medicine is a distinct and very specialized field that requires extensive training, advanced skills, and facilities specifically designed and equipped to treat and hospitalize birds. The Association of Avian Veterinarians was established to provide veterinarians with this special education, and to keep them up to date with the latest information on bird health. The AAV holds an annual conference on avian medicine and publishes the peer-reviewed *Journal of Avian Medicine and Surgery*. AAV also makes annual contributions toward avian conservation and sponsors studies advancing the understanding of avian medicine.

## For More Information

For more information on birds, ask your veterinarian for copies of the following AAV Client Education Brochures:

- Avian Chlamydiosis and Psittacosis
- Veterinary Care for Your Pet Bird\*
- Basic Care for Companion Birds\*
- Behavior: Normal and Abnormal
- Caring for Backyard Chickens
- Digital Scales
- Feather Loss
- Feeding Birds
- Injury Prevention and Emergency Care
- Managing Chronic Egg-laying in Your Pet Bird
- Signs of Illness in Companion Birds\*
- Ultraviolet Lighting for Companion Birds
- When Should I Take My Bird to a Veterinarian?\*
- Zoonotic Diseases in Backyard Poultry\*

*\*Available in multiple languages. All others are available in English only at this time.*

## Online Resources

Follow AAV on Facebook ([www.facebook.com/aavonline](http://www.facebook.com/aavonline)) for great tips and the latest news for pet bird owners. You can also find us on Twitter (@aavonline) and YouTube!

Our website, [www.aav.org](http://www.aav.org), offers a Find-a-Vet tool to help pet bird owners locate avian veterinarians around the world. We also offer a variety of resources such as basic bird care instructions and more. Visit the website today!



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