



## CONVERTING YOUR PARROT OFF A SEED-ONLY DIET



### Dietary Conversion

There is a huge amount of misinformation available when it comes to what to feed your parrot. In fact, we would estimate that 90% of parrot owners are feeding their bird a suboptimal diet which can lead to chronic malnutrition and increase susceptibility to many diseases.

The number one dietary problem that we see is feeding parrots an all seed diet, which is the equivalent of humans eating junk food as our staple diet. While seeds taste great to parrots, they are extremely high in fats and low in most vitamins and minerals, including vitamin A and calcium. Long-term seed only diets can cause and contribute to the following conditions:

- Low vitamin A, which causes abnormalities of the skin, feathers, respiratory and gastrointestinal tract, resulting in dull plumage and predisposing to secondary respiratory and gut infections.
- Hepatic lipidosis – also known as fatty liver disease, a high fat diet results in fat storage within the liver which damages liver cells and predisposes to death of these cells.
- Low calcium which can cause both growth and neurological problems but most importantly, issues with egg production, resulting in egg-binding in female birds.
- High fat diets can predispose to excessive reproductive behaviour in both male and female birds, which can have significant effects on the bird's behaviour and health in the case of egg laying females.

In some species, including cockatiels and budgerigars, seeds are naturally a part of their wild diet. Tropical bird species such as macaws and eclectus parrots eat very few seeds naturally and need a large part of their diet to be made up of vegetables to achieve adequate levels of vitamin A in their diet. As dietary needs vary greatly between species, this conversion guide is generalised and individual species dietary pellet, vegetable, fruit and seed ratios can be found on our website.



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The goal of changing your parrot's diet from a seed-based diet should first start with introduction of a high vegetable content in the diet. Unless a parrot is exposed to many different foods at a very young age, they may not recognise vegetables, fruits and pellets as even being food. While pellets are a fantastic addition to the diet and are a necessary source of protein, minerals and micronutrients, fresh foods such as vegetables should be prioritised before pellets for the following reasons:

- High fiber and nutrient content of fresh foods exceeds that of pellets.
- Teaches your bird to enjoy foods of different textures, colours and tastes, which can prevent food pickiness.
- Fresh foods take longer to eat and encourage foraging which is better for parrot enrichment.

Conversion off a seed-based diet should be done slowly and systematically to be successful – while some birds take to their new diets very quickly, some birds, especially older cockatoo species and budgerigars will be very stubborn and rushing the process can result in severe weight loss and starvation.

### Diet Conversion Guide

#### Week 1

Remove sunflower seeds from the base diet. Sunflower seed can only be used for treats during foraging or training (ie. The bird must work for the food).

#### Week 2

Remove high energy dried corn if it is provided, and safflower seeds (white seeds smaller than sunflower seeds), and introduce a lower fat seed mix such as those containing Japanese millet, white French millet, Canary seed, Panicum seed etc. (These seed mixes are available at The Unusual Pet Vets pre-mixed)



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### Week 3

Finely shred leafy green vegetables such as bok choy, kale, broccoli and other vegetables such as carrot and capsicum and mix a small amount of this through the new seed mix.



*An example of a vegetable chop mix including carrot, spinach, bok choy, celery, mint and whole oats. Great for encouraging foraging behaviour and for introducing new vegetables that the bird has not been exposed to previously.*

### Week 4

Gradually begin decreasing the number of seeds in the vegetable mix and begin offering some whole vegetables in interesting ways for your bird to start playing with.

### Week 5

If your parrot has taken to their new diet and is enjoying a range of vegetables and seeds, pellets can now start to be introduced – initially, crushing the pellets and adding them to the seed and vegetable mix will encourage foraging behaviour and make your bird more likely to start picking up the pellets.



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### Week 6

If your parrot is now eating whole vegetables, vegetables can be removed from the seed mix so that only pellets and seed are available in the bowl, and vegetables are offered as large pieces.

20-30% of the bowl of food should contain pellets, crushed or whole as required at the start.

- Over the coming weeks, gradually increase the pellets until they make up 50-60% of the dry food available in the bowl.
- Ideally offer the largest pellet size available, as this also increases foraging behaviour and has been proven to increase the time a bird spends eating (and therefore using their brain and thinking about something that helps to keep them stimulated).
- Ultimately pellets and seed can be offered in separate bowls and the seed mix can be offered as a meal (morning and evening) in a foraging tray or mixed into the vegetable chop mix to encourage foraging – see our handout about captive foraging for parrots for more information.

It is important to weigh your bird every second or third day during this process, first thing in the morning. Keep a diary of their weight to ensure they aren't losing too much weight too quickly, and are eating adequate amounts of their new diet.





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### Dietary Conversion Option 2

#### For larger parrot species (Ringnecks, Conures, Alexandrines, Galahs and Cockatoos)

Those birds that are inquisitive and accept any human foods, including fruit and vegetables may readily accept pellets as part of their diet in place of their seed mixes. Place the pelleted food in the existing seed dish and ensure there is plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables on offer. If your bird has free range and access to human meals – you can offer the pellets as a “treat” off your plate, this will be seen as a high-value item by your parrot and will help to speed up the introduction of pellets into their diet.

In most cases, the stubborn, older parrots that have been on a seed only diet for many years will be more difficult to convert. We suggest you follow option one above and begin by introducing vegetables into the diet, followed by pellets. This process may take many months, but this is ok. We are moving in the right direction.

#### practical Tips

- ✓ Persist
- ✓ Provide fruits and vegetables during conversion
- ✓ Monitor your birds weight during conversion
- ✓ Use sunflower seeds as enrichment or rewards
- ✓ Once converted birds generally accept changes to pellet types

Good luck with the task of converting your bird to a pelleted diet. You can be assured that your bird will have a longer, healthier life as a result. Please do not hesitate to call should you require any further assistance. We are sure you will notice a change in your bird's wellbeing...as they say, we are what we eat!

