

PET BIRD NUTRITION

Generally the most commonly encountered health issues in companion birds arise from nutritional problems. Inappropriate nutrition in birds such as budgerigars and cockatiels is very common. Until recent years much of our limited knowledge in this area has been borrowed from research in poultry or other animal nutrition. For most of bird keeping history seeds were seen as the primary food source for pet birds. However there are a huge number of species of birds and each is unique in its specific nutritional and feeding requirements. Generally the practice of feeding mostly seed has arisen from a limited number of observations of wild birds.

Wild parrots spend a high proportion of their time and energy accessing food. Our captive pets and aviary birds tend to eat more and exercise less. To make matters more difficult most birds offered seed will pick out their favourite (usually sunflower) elements of what is offered. Like people, pet birds usually do not choose what is best for them. Sunflower seeds are the bird equivalent of a deep fried Mars bar.

Seed based diets are generally not complete and balanced and will inevitably lead to excesses in some nutritional elements and deficiencies in others. Some examples of deficiencies associated with seeds include vitamins (niacin, folic acid etc), minerals (calcium, sodium), protein, fibre and Omega 3 fatty acids. Poor avian nutrition is associated with liver disease, respiratory problems, obesity, bone diseases, diabetes, infertility, poor immunity, tumours; and this is just the tip of the iceberg.

So how can we help our feathered fellows? Elements of a healthy diet include water, fruit, vegetable, plant parts, occasional meat, vitamins, minerals and yes, some seeds. Also access to some sunlight daily is essential for calcium metabolism. Good quality commercially prepared pelleted or crumbled diets are available for specific groups of bird species and life stages. These are complete and balanced, do not require supplementation and make a huge contribution to the health and life expectancy of pet birds. They are best given as about 90% of the diet with 10% fruit and vegetables.

Parrots such as budgies and cockatiels are creatures of habit and it can be very challenging to convert a seed eating pet over to a life extending healthy diet. Generally it is recommended to perform a gradual conversion over several weeks. It is important to monitor intake and weight at this time. Contact the Glen Innes Veterinary Hospital for advice on how best to care for the nutritional needs of your feathered friends.