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TRANSITIONING TO A PELLETTED DIET

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One of the most beneficial things a bird owner can do for their pet is to ensure the diet they give is nutritionally complete and balanced. For most birds, this will require that the majority of the diet be composed of a high quality commercial pellet (50-75% of the daily diet). However, many people will struggle with the process of transitioning from seeds to pellets and then give up without trying either a variety of methods or allow enough time for the transition. While some birds will take to pellets almost immediately, others require weeks to many months. Luckily there are multiple transitioning methods to aid in the process. The key is PERSISTANCE!

- 1) **Switch-er-roo:** Place the new pelleted food in the regular bowl for the entire day, as well as the normal veggies/grains. Offer the old seed diet for 15 minutes in MID morning and again in the LATE evening and allow to eat free choice during that time. (Young and very small birds should be fed four 15 minute meals of the old food throughout the day.) The EARLY morning and EARLY evening meal should consist only of the new food, since most birds are more likely to forage in the early AM and early PM and try new foods. Once the bird is eating the new food (you will see pellet crumbles on the floor), reduce the seed meal to 10 minutes twice a day, and then 5 minutes twice a day, then only once a day, until the seed meal can be stopped altogether.

VARIATION: Remove all food in the late PM at bedtime to increase the morning hunger and foraging behavior in the AM. Offer only the new pellets (with veggies/grains) in the early AM, leave for 1 hour, and then replace with old diet. A week later, leave the new food in for 2 hours in the AM. The next week, leave for 3 hours, etc., until the pellets are left in all day.

- 2) **Monkey see- monkey do!** Place a healthy bird that is currently eating the pelleted diet near the bird needing transition. Allow complete visualization between the two birds. The bird already on the pelleted diet will often prompt the other bird to try the pellets.
- 3) **Gradual Step-Down:** Determine how much seed the bird eats in a meal and begin with that amount. Mix the commercial pellets with the seed diet—about 25% pellets, 75% seeds, for each meal. In between meals allow free access to pellets. After about a week when some pellets have been consumed, reduce the amount of seeds by 10%, and increase the amount of pellets. Two weeks later, reduce the seeds by another 10%, and increase pellets. Continue

this process until the seeds are no longer a part of the diet.

VARIATION: Determine exactly how much seed the bird eats in a given meal. Add in several Tablespoons of the “Healthy Bird Casserole” (see Avian Nutrition handout) to 75% of that amount of seeds, plus a small amount of pellets. The “casserole” will cause the pellets and seeds to all stick together, forcing the bird to consume minute portions of the “casserole”, and hopefully peak interest in the pellets. Feed this mixture at mealtime and allow access to pellets throughout the day. After about 1 week, reduce the amount of seeds by 10%, and increase the amount of pellets. Two weeks later, reduce the seeds by another 10%, and increase pellets. Continue this process until the seeds are no longer a part of the diet.

- 4) Move the bird to a new, unfamiliar environment, such as a different cage or aquarium, several times a day. Place the bird on the floor without perches, and near a small water dish with pellets sprinkled nearby. The bird should begin to play with the pellets, and eventually consume them out of curiosity.
- 5) Offer the bird pellets by hand as a treat until the bird eats them readily. You can encourage the bird to try the pellets by imitate exciting sounds while play-nibbling the pellet just prior to offering one to the bird.
- 6) Hospitalize the bird (ONLY if otherwise healthy) with a veterinarian experienced with birds, and have them perform the transition as follows:

Offer the bird only the pelleted food and fresh veggies/grains (such as the “healthy bird casserole”). The bird must be closely monitored for weight loss, lethargy, or signs of illness. No more than 10% of the bird’s body weight should be lost throughout the transition! Most birds will not eat the new food the first 1-3 days, but will more likely try the food than when at home. If the bird will not eat the new food for 2 days straight or there is more than 10 % weight loss, the old food should be offered again. Two and three attempts may be necessary for a successful transition.
- 7) Many birds enjoy eating at the same time as their owner or “flock-mate”. During those times, allow the bird to have access to only the new pelleted food. At other times of the day, replace with the old seed food plus veggies/grains. Gradually decrease the amount of seeds left during the day as the bird begins to consume the pellets during “mealtime”.
- 8) For smaller species of birds, place a mirror near a bowl of the new food in different location of the cage. Some birds will try to compete for the food with the “other bird” they see in the mirror.
- 9) Position the new food in a bowl near a high point in the cage next to a perch. Many birds will try food from the highest point first. Gradually reduce the amount of old seed diet in the lower bowl, and feed only at mealtimes.
- 10) Try feeding outside of the cage. Some fearful birds will overcome apprehension due to hunger and will willingly come outside the cage to eat. Once the bird will come out of the cage to eat its old diet and a trusting bond has been formed, begin to also offer the new pellets from hand.
- 11) If any of the above methods do not work on their own, try soaking the pellets in a small amount of organic pineapple, apple or carrot juice (or whatever is the birds favorite). Many birds will “drink” the juice from the pellets, and

then eventually nibble and consume them. Gradually reduce the amount of juice on the pellets after the bird begins to consume them until none needs to be given.

- 12) Some birds will also take more easily to pellets that peek their curiosity, such as fruit shaped or colored nuggets (i.e., Zupreem fruit blend). Commercial cakes or balls (i.e., Lafeber's Nutriberries or Avi-cakes) also can be instrumental in stimulating a bird's intellect though different shapes and vitamin fortified seed composites that the bird must work to separate and eat. Although not as nutritious as pellets, the cakes/balls can provide a more balanced diet than seed alone.

MONITORING:

It is extremely important to carefully monitor the bird during the transition for signs of extreme stress or illness. Activity level, appearance, and droppings are all important indicators. A bird should not become quieter than normal or spend a large amount of time fluffed up. The droppings should continue to contain a formed fecal portion of normal shape and consistency. The number of droppings should stay consistent (about 30-40 a day for a Budgie, for example). As veggies, fruits, and people foods are added to the diet, the urine portion of the dropping may increase or the fecal portion may become more bulky. The color of the feces may also change from green to brown, or possibly take on the color of the colored pellets or veggies/fruits. Birds should also be weighed twice weekly for at least the first month. If more than 10% of weight is lost, the bird should be allowed free access to the old diet until the weight is gained back and the process can be attempted again.

If any symptoms of illness occur, seek veterinary attention!!