

Dietary & Meal Time Recommendations for Healthy Digestion

Carlingford Animal Hospital

Digestion disorders are common in pet birds. This brochure outlines our recommendations regarding functional foods that aid healthy digestion. The following instruction regarding meal preparation and diet apply to all companion parrot species kept as pets except for budgerigars, cockatiels, black cockatoos, macaws, princess parrots and other grassland parrots that rely upon a dry food diet of hard seeds for healthy digestion.

The Importance of Distinct Meal Times

The first meal of the day is the most important regarding healthy digestion as it is taken on an empty stomach. It should be given as soon after daylight as possible because this is the normal meal time in the wild. Importantly, all food remnants from the previous evening meal and the previous day's foraging items need to be removed from the cage the night before. This routine ensures the bird is hungry and will eagerly seek and completely consume its morning meal. Healthy digestion relies on this first meal of the day to fill and stretch the stomach to full capacity, which stimulates the maximum release of acid digestive juices. This full release of stomach acids is key to healthy digestion.

The midday meal consists of foraging foods. These are placed in the cage at the conclusion of the morning meal and play an important role in keeping the bird occupied during the middle of the day. Foraging foods are also fed to provide dry, hard textured foods to stimulate the robust gizzard muscular activity needed to drive a healthy rate of digestion. It should be noted that hard foods must be gradually introduced to birds recovering from digestive dysfunction as excessively fibrous foods are too harsh for weakened gizzard muscles to grind causing cramping, discomfort and further digestive disturbance.

The afternoon meal provides sustenance to the bird throughout the night. It can be given any time from 3 hours before sunset until nightfall which mimics the wild bird evening feeding behaviour. After the evening meal has been eaten all food remains are removed from the cage. This bedtime routine is good for hygiene purposes and also ensures your bird will have a strong appetite by the next mealtime.

The Morning Meal

The moisture and textural qualities of cooked foods provide the best means for encouraging healthy stomach digestion in captive parrots. The standard morning meal is comprised of boiled rice, boiled pumpkin or sweet potato, cooked corn and peas. These foundation foods are both nutritious and functional. They can be fed every day as parrots do not seek variety in taste, enjoying more the textural qualities of foods. Birds reared on a pelleted or dry food seed diet may take a little time to become accustomed to the soft textures of the cooked meal. In most cases however, many species – particularly eclectus, conures, asiatics and other fruit eating tropical parrots – will immediately relish in the textural components of this new diet.

Tassie Beans should be incorporated into the morning meal as the chief protein source. This is particularly important for the larger species such as cockatoos, galahs, amazons and macaws. Nuts are another source of protein and are needed as a supplemental energy source for larger parrots such as black cockatoos and the big macaws. We suggest 8-10 nuts (almonds, macadamia, pine nuts and walnuts) are given in their morning meal as they have a much higher energy need than the smaller parrots.

The natural source of energy for fruit eating tropical parrots and small species comes more from fructose rich fruit pulp than from the energy fats contained in nuts. Therefore, nuts are not given to these smaller parrots. Instead, high fructose fruit pulp found in figs, apple, pear, watermelon and plums are given as their preferred source of energy. Kiwifruit, rockmelon, mango and papaya are other favoured foods given for their nutritional benefits. Grapes are available all year round and are also relished. These are placed on the top of the cooked morning meal. Although nutritionally valuable, soft skin fruits such as berries and strawberries represent a contamination risk and should be avoided.

The morning meal should be left in the cage for 1 hour. After this time all food remnants are removed to protect the birds from spoilage contamination. The water container should also be refreshed each morning to ensure a clean supply of drinking water.

Maintaining Healthy Digestion

Stomach (proventriculus):

- Boiled pumpkin
- Cooked rice

Gizzard:

- Raw apple
- Raw carrot
- Citrus rind
- Fresh branches
- Hard bark
- Passionfruit (seeds)
- F-Vite (shell grit)

Restoring Healthy Digestion

Stomach During Recovery:

- Boiled pumpkin
- Cooked rice
- Cooked apple

Gizzard During Recovery:

- Raw apple (peeled)
- Steamed Carrot
- Ve8 Powder

Foraging Foods During the Day

At the completion of the morning meal, any cooked food remnants are removed and replaced with sterile seed and millets on the spray. The daily seed portion for medium to larger parrot species should contain some sunflower seed as an energy source. These fatty seeds must be fed in moderation until the cooked morning meal routine is readily accepted and established as their main source of nutrition. Sunflower seed and nuts should not be given to smaller parrots or fruit eating tropical parrots, especially eclectus, as these birds do not require fat in their diet as a source of energy and excesses predispose them to obesity and digestive disorders.

Passionfruit is a favourite of many birds and an excellent foraging food as they spend considerable time cracking the seeds into small sharp edged fragments. These hard broken seed parts require considerable effort to grind and are especially beneficial for strong, healthy gizzard function. Although a very good dietary aid for maintaining strong gizzard function in healthy birds, passionfruit should not be given to birds recovering from digestive disturbances until the gizzard has regained its full muscular strength.

Foraging foods are placed in the cage at the completion of the morning meal. These foods include uncooked fresh vegetables and fruits that are unlikely to spoil. Organically certified fruits and vegetables are best. Raw apple (peeled and skewered), green beans, parsley stalks and leaves, passionfruit, carrot, orange or lemon rind are good examples of foraging foods. Citrus peel is recommended as it is nutritious and also contains dietary fibres that aid healthy digestion. Raw green leafy vegetables (e.g. broccoli, bok choy and kale etc.) which offer additional coarse fibre are given during the day for occupation and to strengthen gizzard action.

Sterile millet sprays and fresh cut small branches from eucalypt trees (with young leaves), grevillea and bottle brush flowers are an ideal foraging activity for smaller birds. Their coarse fibrous texture plays an additional functional role regarding digestion by stimulating strong gizzard muscle activity. Larger parrot species (e.g. cockatoos) prefer more substantial branches and tree nuts (casuarina, gumnuts and other hard cased fruits) to chew and these are also a perfect natural source of coarse fibre for their large, muscular gizzard.

The Evening Meal

Seeds and the other foraging foods, which are made available during the day, should be removed around 3pm. Playtime is then recommended to stimulate a healthy appetite before dinner. It is important that the evening meal is offered before sunset. This is a most active and social time of the day, when in the wild, birds flock to the food source before heading off to roost just before dusk.

Once pet birds become accustomed to the favoured textural qualities of cooked food they will eagerly seek these soft foods as their evening meal although they have had access to foraging food throughout the day. The evening meal contains the same nutritious food choices as the morning meal incorporating Tassie Beans and boiled rice, which gives the diet a perfect amino acid-protein balance. Nuts are not to be given in the evening to larger parrots. All foods remnants and foraging foods are removed at bedtime.

Nutritional Requirements

The above feeding routine provides the textural qualities required for healthy digestion. In order to completely balance the nutritional requirements of birds kept as pets, dietary supplements are added to either the cooked morning meal or the seed. Turbobooster, E-Powder and F-Vite are usually added to the seed and this remains an easy and practical means to provide nutritional supplements. There is also an option to provide these supplements as well as Dufoplus, Ioford and Quik Gel in the cooked morning meal. The choice is based on your bird's preference and the food preparation routine that best suits your needs.

To assist with the preparation of the cooked morning and evening meal it is recommended to prepare a large batch of cooked foundation foods (boiled rice, boiled pumpkin/sweet potato, cooked corn and peas) in advance and freeze small portions that can be easily defrosted and heated. Seasonal fruits are then added to these warm meals and foraging foods are given throughout the day.

Birds Recovering from Digestive Dysfunction

For birds recovering from digestive disturbances, Ve8 Powder is included in the feeding plan to control symptoms of the discomfort caused by gas forming and other bacterial infections whilst the underlying cause of the digestive dysfunction is resolved. Ve8 Powder may be sprinkled on top of the morning meal or added to the seed using Turbobooster as binding oil. During recovery from stomach (proventriculus) dysfunction, cooked apple and steamed pumpkin are provided to begin the restoration of healthy stomach function. When recovering from gizzard weakness it is important to allow time for the gizzard muscles to redevelop their strength before offering coarse textured foods. This is achieved by first providing softer foods such as steamed carrot and raw apple before harder foods are introduced. As the gizzard function improves more coarse foods such as raw carrot, green beans, celery and fresh young leaves can then be introduced to the diet.