



Pellet Conversion for Birds

Introduction

Feeding the correct diet is an important part of keeping your bird healthy and happy. While dry seed is convenient, it is not ideal, and birds that are fed a seed only diet are often more prone to health problems. In addition, some seeds are high in fat which can cause tumours as well as joint and liver problems.

Pellets are an extremely nutritious food source, providing all the nutrients that birds require. They are also more economical in the long term than seed (when you look at the health benefits as well as the food cost). The process of converting a bird from a seed diet to a pelleted diet should be done carefully and considerably. Done incorrectly, a mismanaged diet conversion is like a 'fad' diet for humans, and can have severe consequences. Please talk to our staff before beginning any dietary conversion. We will ask you several questions to help you determine which conversion program is best suited for your bird, and can provide you with a personalised conversion chart to follow.

The Goal

As a general guide, a pellet-based diet will consist of:

Cockatiels, lovebirds and budgies:

- 50% good quality pellets
- 30% budgie seed mix
- 20% vegetables plus a small amount of fruit

Other psittacine species:

- 90% good quality pellet
- 10% vegetables plus a small amount of fruit and nuts (larger species can have more nuts)

Canaries and finches:

- 80% good quality pellet
- 10% quality seed mix
- 10% small chopped vegetables plus a small amount of fruit

Before starting

Before you start the conversion from seed to pellets, we advise a veterinary examination to ensure your bird is healthy.

Once you receive the "all clear", you are ready to start.

The first step is to calculate the amount of seed your bird eats each day:

- Source either digital scales (that weigh in 1 gram increments) or metric measuring spoons.
- Place a measured amount of seed in the food dish each morning.
- The next morning, blow off the husks and measure the remaining seed. The difference between the two is the daily seed consumption (in either teaspoons or grams)
- Do this for 3-4 days.
- Calculate the average seed consumption per day for your bird.
- Start the conversion process by giving your bird only twice the average daily seed consumption each day.

Introducing the pellets

There are many different 'methods' for converting birds to pellets. We have found that the most successful method is to place the pellet container at the highest part of the bird's cage, and the seed container much lower (birds tend to prefer to eat from a higher place).

For budgies and cockatiels, placing a 'hall of mirrors' just above the pellet dish and placing pellets on the mirrored shelf works well as these birds are often 'tricked' into believing that another bird is eating the pellets.

This method can also work by sprinkling some pellets over a flat mirror placed on the floor of the cage (carefully avoiding positions that may get soiled, such as underneath perches, water or food dishes).

Other tips include:

- Sprinkling a small amount of pellets over the top of the seed.
- Pretend to eat the pellets yourself before offering to your bird.
- Use human mealtimes as a feeding stimulus, by removing all food containers except the pellets out of the cage.
- Moisten pellets into a paste with the previous food, gradually reducing the quantities of previous food and water added to the paste.
- Praise when you see the bird eating the pellets.

Once you have introduced the pellets and your bird has started to eat them, gradually reduce the amount of seed provided by 5-10% per day while monitoring your birds weight and droppings closely.

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Monitoring

During the conversion process, you should monitor at least one of the following:

- **The bird's body weight:**
Using digital scales that weigh in 1 gram increments, weigh the bird first thing every morning before feeding. Keep a daily record of this weight.
- **The droppings:**
Normal droppings have volume and bulk, with a small amount of urine (Picture 1). Birds that are not eating will have small, dark, collapsed droppings (Picture 2).
- **The total food intake:**
Monitor the food dish to see how much has been eaten. This can be accomplished by weighing the food before and after to see how much has been eaten throughout the day.

If any of the following occur:

- Your bird starts to look fluffed or unwell.
- The droppings become dark and small.
- The weight drops by more than 2% in any single day.
- The weight drops by more than 5% per week.
- ...then **STOP THE CONVERSION PROCESS IMMEDIATELY.**

Place a bowl of seed in the cage with your bird, provide additional heat and call us as soon as possible.

Finally

Be patient. The conversion from seed to pellets is a gradual process, and as such it is important not to hasten this by removing all seed prematurely. However once converted, the long-term health benefits will far outweigh the time spent coaxing your bird onto the new diet.

Picture 1: normal dropping



Picture 2: abnormal dropping – this bird has not eaten for at least 12 hours as indicated by the scant faecal output and increased urine and urates.

