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## **Converting “Seed Junkies”**

A seed junkie is a bird that eats only seeds and nuts, steadfastly refusing most other foods offered. Unfortunately, such an exclusive diet guarantees ill health and a greatly shortened life expectancy. Why do caged birds become so easily hooked on seeds (primarily sunflower and safflower) and nuts (peanuts most notably) when these foods are rarely part of their diet in the wild? It concerns the relatively high fat content of these food items. For years, there has been speculation that sunflower seeds contain some addictive property. Recent research at the University of California at Davis has revealed that the relatively high fat content of these foods produces an energy rush or high, similar to the sugar rushes from consuming junk foods containing lots of sugar.

Parrots, given the opportunity, preferentially eat these high-fat foods. When deprived of them, they exhibit profound depression and a craving for the seeds. This almost addictive quality of seeds certainly contributes to the huge number of seed junkies currently being kept as pet birds.

### **Pelleted Diets Are Important**

Caged birds should be fed a wide variety of high-quality foodstuffs. Seeds and nuts in the diet must be restricted to maximize optimal health and prevent disease. Unfortunately, just because we offer a veritable smorgasbord every day to our pet birds, this is no guarantee that they will consume the foods. Furthermore, there is certainly no guarantee that our birds will consume food items in the proper dietary proportions; therefore, we at Canyon View Animal Hospital recommend Harrison’s Pelleted Bird Diets. They are premium, balanced, organic, whole grain and legume diets. They are just like premium dog and cat foods—they contain all the nutrients for a healthy, happy bird, and they are no-brainers to feed. If you are a busy person on the go and don’t have time to give the daily variety of foods your bird needs, pelleted diets are the perfect answer. However, switching these perennial 2-year olds from the equivalent of french fries (seeds) to healthy foods will take time, patience and a little imagination. Birds, like people, can become easily habituated in their feeding behavior and diet. Birds must gain substantial familiarity with a given food item before they will attempt to eat it. It may take weeks or months for the complete conversion.

### **Here are a few suggestions for converting your bird:**

**Restrict Seeds:** Another method of encouraging experimentation with other foods involves restricting the amount of seed offered every day. Estimate the quantity of seeds that your bird will consume without any restriction in a 24-hour period as accurately as possible, and then offer only half of this estimated amount each day. This ensure that you bird will not starve but should still be hungry enough to begin to experiment with the table food items offered.

**Mix with Seeds:** Mixing unfamiliar food items directly with the seeds sometimes fosters gradual acceptance and sampling of them. We recommend starting with Harrison’s High Potency Mash. Cover your bird’s seeds with a thin layer of mash so s/he gets used to the texture and taste of the formulated diet as they dig through it to get to their seeds. Gradually reduce the amount of seed and increase the amount of mash. Next, add Harrison’s pellets (small or large) to the seed mixture. For large birds, try Harrison’s Power Treats—an attractive, toasted treat which introduces them to pellets. Gradually reduce the amount of seeds. If your bird likes fruit, try mixing Harrison’s mash with fruit such as banana, grapes or strawberry’s that the mash will stick to.

**Monkey See, Monkey Do:** Some birds may be more agreeable to trying new foods if they see their owners eating the food. Our staff has all tasted Harrison’s diet, and it tastes like Grape Nuts (the Power Treats are especially good). Eating a few pellets or other healthy foods in front of your bird may be a rewarding ploy. Hand feeding new food items may also help them to accept new and unfamiliar foods. Don’t feed directly from your lips because the bacteria in your mouth may be harmful to your bird.

**Try Soft Foods:** Another usually successful strategy involves getting a reluctant bird to first accept a particular soft food, such as baby cereal, oatmeal, cream of wheat or baby food (fruit, meat or vegetables). You may also try moistening the pellets diets in fruit juice or the water in canned tuna. A powdered vitamin/mineral/amino acid supplement, such as Lefebver vitamins can be mixed into this food to immediately improve the bird's nutritional status. Once the bird is readily eating this food, begin to mix unfamiliar or untried foods into the soft foods. Continue this until the bird begins to accept a wide variety of food items, whether or not they are presented within the food itself.

**Make Cornbread:** Most birds love cornbread!! Get a cornbread mix and put in veggies, pellets, mashed tree nuts (see below), and anything else you can think of that is healthy for your bird

**Change Locations:** It may be helpful to introduce new foods by placing them below a mirror or adjacent to a favorite toy within the bird's cage. Some birds are more willing to accept new foods if fed outside of their cage in a favorite area.

**Remove Seeds:** Another method is to remove most, but not all, of the 1-2 types of seeds your bird most prefers. An alternative method involves removing the preferred seeds at night and not replacing them in the morning. Birds are hungrier in the morning and are more likely to accept new foods at that time. Seeds are then added into the food cup later in the day only if your bird refuses to eat any of the other foods available. This process is repeated day after day.

**Vary the Form:** How the new food items are presented can make a big difference to your bird. Carrots are a good source of vitamin A and are high on the list of recommended foods. We will use this to illustrate a point. Your bird may be frightened, or at least suspicious, of a whole carrot or carrot stick because of that foods size and shape, but the bird might be more willing to sample grated carrot or carrot peelings. Your bird may actually prefer eating cooked to raw carrots because of the change in texture produced by the cooking. Sometimes, presenting a given food item in an entirely different form hastens its consumption. For example, your bird might willingly accept carrot cake even though it has steadfastly refused carrot in all other variations. You may try adding pellets or veggies to a corn bread recipe or boxed mixture and bake together.

**Colored Pellets:** Some seed junkie birds can be converted to Zupreme colored pelleted diet first. The pellets are brightly colored and smell fruity—like Fruit Loops cereal. I have found that some seed junkies accept this type of pelleted diet first. Food coloring is not generally recommended in the long term, but it is much healthier than a seed diet, so my philosophy is to get them to accept the Zupreme first, then convert to a healthier diet such as Harrisons.

**Other nuts:**You may also try transitioning with Nutriberries products, which are seeds coated with a vitamin mixture. You can also try offering tree nuts such as pecans, walnuts, cashews and macadamia nuts. Mash them and sprinkle on their seed or other foods. These are healthier than seeds.

*Diet changes should never be attempted with sick birds or with those suffering from multiple stresses* (change of environment, new cage mate, exposure to temperature extremes, etc.) because forcing a bird to experiment with unfamiliar foods produces a fair amount of stress itself. Caged birds tend to select their foods according to habit (what they are accustomed to eating) and the appearance of the foods offered. If the food item is unfamiliar (or worse yet, perceived as threatening to the bird), it will not attempt to eat it. Birds must become familiar with a food before any experimentation is likely. Visual and tactile (touch and feel) familiarity seems to be important.

### **Patience is rewarded**

All of the strategies mentioned above could be attempted to encourage your pet bird to accept a wide variety of table food items. You must be very persistent and patient with your bird. Improving their diet requires a total commitment on you part. It may take many months, but the effort made and frustration endured will pay dividends in improved health and long life for you companion.

***Make sure your bird is eating during the conversion process. How do you know? Watch the droppings! Are they getting smaller or non-existent? If so, try another tactic. Let us know what worked for you!!!***