**Basic Parrot Care**

1. **Nutrition**

Improper feeding is a common cause of disease and death in pet birds (Brook-Falls Veterinary Hospital & Exotic Care, 2018). That is why a good nutrition play an essential role in keeping your pet healthy.

What to feed?

* For a balanced nutritious diet, it is recommended to always feed a formulated pellet diet.
	+ Pelleted diets are carefully formulated to contain all vitamins and minerals your parrot needs. It comes in various shape, size and colour.
* Provide fresh clean water at all times (U-Vet, 2017).
* Provide fresh vegetables daily and small amount of fruit (U-Vet, 2017)
	+ Remove uneaten fresh food within an hour
* In general, the recommended proportion of feed for parrots is: 70% - 80% formulated diet and 20% other food such as vegetables, fruits or limited amount of seeds
	+ Dr Neo’s recommendation (varies for different species): 40-50% pellets, 10% treats (can be pellets), 10% seeds, 30-40% fresh food
* Recommended formulated pellet brands: Harrison’s, Roudybush, Zupreem, Kaytee (McLeod, 2019)

Other things you can feed

* It is good to provide a variety of food. Hence, you can still feed other wholesome human food, but in **small amounts.**

List of common safe and toxic food (McLeod, 2019) (Zupreem Pet, 2021) (Mount Pleasant Veterinary Group, 2019)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Safe | Toxic |
| Vegetables | Carrots, corn, cucumber. Cauliflower, broccoli, eggplant, snow peas, bell peppers, green beans, pumpkin  | Onion, garlic  |
| Fruits | Mango, papaya, kiwi, banana, cherry, orange, grapes, apple, pineapple, pears, melon, peaches, berries | Avocado, fruit pits and seeds |
| Others | Cooked brown rice, Cooked quinoa, oats, wheat, barley, bread, cooked pasta, hard boiled eggs | Chocolate, caffeinated drinks, alcoholic drinks, dairy products, salty food, fatty food |

Common misconception

* A common misconception when it comes to feeding parrots is providing them commercial seed diets which tends to be high in fats and calories and lack important nutrients such as calcium and vitamin A (Brook-Falls Veterinary Hospital & Exotic Care, 2018).
* Though parrots in the wild feed mainly on seeds, another reason for not providing only commercial seed diet is due to the seeds being processed and may lack essential vitamins that the parrots require.
* Parrots fed mainly seeds can often cause many health problems such as obesity and liver disease (Mount Pleasant Veterinary Group, 2019).
* Seed is an optional part of the diet and should be given sparingly as treats instead. (Avian & Animal Hospital, n.d.)

Extra vitamins and minerals

* In general, birds eating mainly pellets do not require supplements (Axelson & Hess, n.d.).
* When is it acceptable to feed supplements?
	+ Egg-laying - uses up energy and depletes calcium
	+ Moulting - a stressful process and uses up energy, hence more nutritious food should be offered
	+ Parrots that has difficulty converting to a pelleted diet i.e. on a seed-only diet
* To avoid over-dose, provide supplements only if recommended by your avian vet (Hari, n.d.).

Other things to take note

* Clean food and water bowl daily to prevent growth of bacteria (Brook-Falls Veterinary Hospital & Exotic Care, 2018).
* Converting a bird from a seed diet to a pelleted diet can be difficult and takes time, so do not give up! (Brook-Falls Veterinary Hospital & Exotic Care, 2018)
* Always introduce new food slowly, never starve your bird into eating something new (Avian and Animal Hospital, n.d.).
1. **Environment/Housing**

Placement of cage

* Ideal location:
	+ In a corner or against a wall in the room where the family uses (Small Animal Hospital, n.d.)
		- This allows bird to feel more safe, yet is able to interact with humans. Pet birds like parrots are prey animals which still has wild instincts to protect themselves from predators. Hence, putting the cage in the middle of the room forces them to keep a lookout from all sides of the cage. This can result in stress.
	+ Height of cage should not be too high or low – chest level is ideal (Hartz, 2019)
		- Birds get anxious when they are placed on the ground.
		- When cage is placed higher than eye level, birds may feel isolated as there may be less interaction with the owners.
		- Cages higher than eye level are more difficult for owners to reach and observe their pets.
	+ Constant temperature
	+ No toxic fumes (Hartz, 2019)
		- Non-stick coating e.g. TeflonTM found in non-stick cookware (pans) and appliances like self-cleaning ovens and toasters.
		- Smoke and other aerosols like hair spray, perfumes, incense, candle fumes, spray cleaners, paint, varnishes etc.(Veterinary Center for Birds & Exotics, 2018)
		- Heating Teflon or other nonstick surface to very high temperatures will lead to the release of a gaseous toxin called polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE). PTFE is known to cause death to birds within 24h of exposure. (Axelson, n.d.)
		- Birds have very sensitive respiratory systems and common fumes we find in our households can irritate, cause damage to our bird’s lungs and even death. (Axelson, n.d.)
	+ Good ventilation
	+ Cage should be placed in an area with adequate natural lighting but not in constant direct sunlight (Daisy Street Veterinary Centre, 2017).
		- Sunlight is needed for the synthesis of vitamin D.

Size of cage

* The bigger the cage the better (Bucktons, 2016a)
	+ This allows the bird to have plenty of space to move around comfortably.
* A wider cage is better than a taller cage as birds fly horizontally, not vertically

What to include in cage?

* Perch
	+ Perches serves a variety of purposes, which includes helping to exercise your parrot’s feet and file their nails down
	+ Perches should be appropriate in diameter, length and material for comfortable grip
		- It is best to provide perches of varying sizes to allow your parrot to exercise their feet and choose what is comfortable. (Axelson & Hess, n.d.)
	+ Perches can be placed at different levels in cage to encourage movement (Doering, 2016)
	+ Same-diameter perches can result in sore feet (Axelson & Hess, n.d.)
	+ Avoid sandpaper perches as it can lead to the development of foot problems (Bucktons, 2016)
	+ Rope perches must be monitored carefully. Frayed rope perches is a hazard for your pet as it can result in entanglement around bird’s feet and accidental ingestion (Axelson & Hess, n.d.)
* Food and water bowls
	+ Placed in areas that cannot be contaminated by pet’s faeces (AVA, 2017)
	+ Recommendation by Dr Neo:
		- A stainless steel bowl is ideal for easy cleaning and maintenance. It is also less destructible, which decreases the risk of ingestion.
		- Make sure to scrub and rinse well with mild detergent and water.
* Enrichment (Stahl Exotic Animal Veterinary Services)
	+ A range of toys should be provided.
	+ Toys should be made of bird-safe materials.
	+ Toys should be changed and rotated regularly for continuous mental and physical stimulation.
* Cage Bedding
	+ Newspaper and paper towels are ideal for lining bottom of bird cages for easy monitoring and removal of bird’s droppings. (Beecroft Birds Exotics Veterinary Clinic, 2020)

Cage safety

* Cage material should be made of safe and non-toxic materials e.g. Stainless steel (AVA, 2017)
* When choosing the largest cage possible, the cage bar spacing should be appropriate for your parrot’s species to prevent parts of their body (e.g. head, feet) from getting stuck between the bars and injuring themselves (BirdTricks, 2012)
* Cage doors must have secure locks on cage openings to prevent escape (Petsway, 2018)
1. **Health**

Grooming

* Wings
	+ Bird’s wing feathers can be clipped to prevent accidental escape or reaching dangerous places at home. It is recommended to first consult your avian veterinarian to show you how to perform a proper wing clipping (Brook-Falls Veterinary Hospital & Exotic Care, 2018)
	+ Wing clipping remains a highly debatable topic. It is encourage to read up more on the risks and benefits of wing clipping before deciding on whether to proceed. (College of Veterinary Medicine, 2016)
	+ Though wing clipping can be done at home, clipping their feathers wrongly can result in injury (e.g. bleeding) from the clipping and flight impairments which can also lead to injury (e.g. crashing onto the floor due to inability to land safely with badly trimmed feathers) (College of Veterinary Medicine, 2016)
* Beak
	+ Should wear down naturally when eating, climbing and playing (Hess & Axelson, n.d.)
	+ Normal beaks should wear down naturally. Any excessive growth or thickening may indicate underlying health conditions. (PetMD, 2017)
	+ The beak tip of birds contain many blood vessels and nerve endings. The beak tip of birds contain many blood vessels and nerve endings. Hence if trimmed wrongly, it can cause severe pain and beaks can bleed or break. (PetMD, 2017)
	+ Overgrown/ Misaligned beaks should be taken care of by vets, never try to trim your parrot’s beak at home (Hess & Axelson, n.d.b)
* Nails
	+ Can be naturally filed down by preening and grooming, along with providing perches of different size, shape and texture (Hess & Axelson, n.d.a)
	+ Nails should be trimmed when overgrown
		- Overgrown nails will cause the tip of bird’s toes to be lifted from the surface or the nails to be rotated to the side (AnimalWonders Montana, 2020)
	+ Nail trimming can be done at home but must be done carefully. It is best to consult your veterinarian beforehand tp ensure you are doing it safely and correctly (AVH Animal Ark Veterinary Group, 2019)

Bathing

* Importance of bathing
	+ For healthy feathers and skin by removing dirt, bacteria, dander or excess oil from feathers (AnimalWonders Montana, 2020)
* When to bathe (Axelson & Hess, n.d.)
	+ Provide a **choice** for your bird to bathe daily or not
	+ However, a bath should be provided at least once a week.
* How to Bathe (Kalhagen, 2019)
	+ Note: Do not blow-dry your parrot with hair dryers as some hair dryers may contain non-stick coating which is toxic to birds. (Dummies, n.d.)
	+ Ensure that there is sufficient heat for parrots to dry off after their bath. Hence, it is recommended to bathe them or provide a bath in the day and allow them to dry off in the sun or heating lamp is possible. (Dummies, n.d.)
		- Ensure that there is also partial shade provided when placing your bird in the sun to give your pet a choice to move into the shade if it gets too hot.
		- The morning sun is recommended as it is less hot as compared to the afternoon sun.
	+ Always observe your parrots reaction to bathing. For example, if your pet gets extremely frightened by misting, try other methods like: (Dummies, n.d.)
		- By itself in a wide and shallow enough dish (depending on size of bird) of clean, room temperature water
			* \*No soap should be used
		- Shower on a shower perch
		- Spray bottle/ Misting
		- Hang wet leaves for birds to brush against

Maintaining bird’s mental and physical health

* Parrots are active and highly sociable animals. Hence, it is essential to provide them with opportunities to exercise, play, socialize and bond with their owners every day. (West Gate Animal Clinic, n.d.)
* Ways to stimulate bird’s mental and physical health
	+ Toys (Association of Avian Veterinarians [AAV], n.d.a)
	+ Training (AAV, n.d.a)
	+ Supervised time outside of the cage (Beecroft Birds Exotics Veterinary Clinic, 2020)

Basic health examination

* Birds are very good at hiding symptoms of illness. When a bird shows evident signs of illness, the illness has usually become quite serious. Do not wait and seek veterinary care as soon as possible (Brisbane Bird & Exotics Veterinary Service, 2020). Here are 6 common signs of illnesses to look out for when monitoring your bird’s health.
1. Rapid increase or decrease in body weight (AAVb, n.d.)
2. Increased rate and effort in breathing (Brisbane Bird & Exotics Veterinary Service, 2020)
	1. Example: Opened-mouth breathing, bobbing of tail up and down with each breath (Gaia Veterinary Centre, 2019).
3. Changes in behaviour
	1. Example: Sleepy, fluffed-up (RSPCA Knowledgebase, 2018), eating and drinking more or less than usual (AAVb, n.d.)
4. Dull, dirty, damaged or missing feathers (Bucktons, 2016b)
5. Changes in general appearance
	1. Example: Discharge from eyes, cere (nostrils), mouth and vent (RSPCA Knowledgebase, 2019)
6. Change in quantity, colour, texture and consistency of stool (Gaia Veterinary Centre, 2019)
* Pro tip: If your pet is behaving abnormally, take a video or picture. This helps your vet in assessing and diagnosing your pet (which may appear fine at the clinic)!

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Extra ressources :

* List of Avian Vets in Singapore (last updated: Dec 2019): <https://parrotfunhouse.com/pages/list-of-avian-vets-in-singapore>
* Common household hazards:

<https://vcahospitals.com/know-your-pet/household-hazards-and-dangers-to-birds>

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