



# AVIAN REPTILE & EXOTIC PET HOSPITAL BUDGERIGARS, COCKATIELS AND LOVEBIRDS - GENERAL HEALTH CARE

## INTRODUCTION

Cockatiels, budgerigars and lovebirds are the most commonly kept parrots in Australia. They are especially good pets because they are not especially loud, do not need large cages, are relatively easy to feed and can entertain themselves in their cage, yet are often eager to get out and be with their owners. Of the three species the cockatiel is the most likely to be sociable and the lovebird the least likely.

## DIET

To keep these birds healthy, they need a daily mix of seeds, pellets, and fresh plant material. Seeds should make up about 50% of their diet. Seeds do not contain calcium or many vitamins so these birds should also be taught to eat pelleted diets and pellets should make up about 25% of the diet. Birds may need encouragement before they will eat pellets. Making up pellet rissoles, mixing the pellets with other food, and appearing to eat the pellets yourself can sometimes convince reluctant birds to eat the pellets. Pellets by themselves contain too much calcium and will cause kidney damage if fed exclusively.

The remainder of the diet should contain green and orange vegetables and herbs such as spinach, Asian greens, parsley, mint, peas, pumpkin, carrots, and beans. Do not feed rhubarb leaves, lilies, avocado and chocolate. Feeding of native foliage such as bottlebrush, grevillea, banksia and eucalypts as well as seeding grasses from an area that hasn't been sprayed with chemicals is an ideal way to improve the nutritional value of the diet and provide behavioural enrichment. Clean water should be provided daily in clean bowls kept up high to avoid contamination with droppings. Provide a calcium and mineral source such as grit, cuttlebone, a calcium bell or chalk stick.

## HOUSING

These three species of parrots would prefer to live in cages that would allow them some flight. Many Australian bird owners keep their birds in sheltered predator proof outdoors aviaries or large cages during the day and house them in smaller cages inside when they are home. Others will keep their birds in outdoor aviaries all the time. This is not an option for everyone and these birds generally do well in smaller cages that are more appropriate for those with limited space.

Natural gum tree branches are ideal perches and parrots love to destroy the bark covering them. Branches should vary in diameter from one end to the other, but the average diameter should allow the bird to wrap its foot 3/4s of the way around the branch. Doweling wood perches lead to sores and infections on the bottom of the foot. Do not use rope toys as birds may chew on these and crop and stomach impactions can develop.

Cages should be made of stainless steel. Staples, bag ties, nails, screws and wire contain lead and zinc so birds should never have access to them. Do not house birds near kitchens or open fires where there could be smoke, gas or cooking fumes. Pet birds should ideally have some out of cage time to express natural flight behaviour and interact with their owners every day.



Cockatiel  
(*Nymphicus hollandicus*)

Budgerigar  
(*Melopsittacus undulatus*)



Fischer's Lovebird  
(*Agapornis fischeri*)

## BEHAVIOUR AND TRAINING

Hand-raised birds are the easiest to train, but recently weaned birds also respond well. Pet parrots require a lot of social interaction. A single bird requires 45 minutes of direct contact time and 3 hours of indirect contact time per day. Positive reinforcement techniques gain your bird's trust. All family members should take part in training and play time. You need to teach your bird to be part of a flock and develop successful relationships.

Food rewards can be used as part of training to achieve a 'step-up' and 'step-down' behaviour on to the hand. This can then be built on to ask for behaviours such as coming in and out of the cage. When the bird is out of the cage, it should remain on your hand or on a perch that you take with you around the house. Do not allow your bird to sit on your shoulder. Here they are dominant and can exhibit aggressive behaviour such as biting when you attempt to remove the bird from your shoulder.

Bird owners will benefit greatly from attending a behaviour and training consultation beginning at the new bird exam. Behavioural enrichment keeps a bird mentally healthy. Birds should be provided with toys as soon as they are brought home and new and old toys exchanged regularly. Toys with mirrors and shiny bells can lead to bonding with the reflection and less interaction with the owners. Toys that allow the bird to forage for food and encourage problem solving are vital to optimise your bird's health and will help to prevent feather destructive behaviour and obesity.

## PURCHASING A BIRD

Whenever possible purchase your bird directly from a breeder. Locate a breeder that has sold healthy birds to others. Ask the specific age of the bird, how their birds are housed and what they are fed. It is also important to find out if the bird was hand fed by spoon or crop tube and whether it will require further hand feeding.

## DISEASE PREVENTION

New birds should be seen by an avian veterinarian within a week of purchase and once a year thereafter. A tailored health and disease testing program for you and your bird will be set up including testing for diseases such as psittacosis and beak and feather disease. The vet will follow up any specific problems identified on physical examination and will answer any questions on diet, housing and training for your bird. Persistent egg laying can result in significant medical problems, especially in cockatiels and less commonly in budgerigars and lovebirds.

## SIGNS OF ILLNESS

A sick bird needs to be taken to the veterinarian immediately, as most of their diseases can overcome them quickly. Some signs of illness include a cessation of talking or a change in the quality of the voice, a change of behaviour, decreased food consumption, sleeping more than normal, swelling around or redness of the eye, matting of feathers round the nose, vomiting, liquid droppings, bleeding, and weightloss.

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