

The Importance of Cleaning Fruit and Vegetables for Your Birds (and YOU!)

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Maintaining our avian companions in an environment that protects them from illness and potential hazards is a great responsibility. We must be vigilant to recognize disease symptoms and strive to keep them free from disease through good husbandry practices. There are disease organisms everywhere and hazards lurking in seemingly innocent places.

Our focus in this article is that of fresh foods provided to your birds and the associated problems that exist. It is well recognized that a variety of nutritious foods is essential to maintain good health and longevity. However, there are certain considerations when feeding a bird fresh foods. Of course, we all know the dangers of certain foods, such as avocado, chocolate and caffeine, and their effect on pet birds. But other less obvious dangers exist as well.

I cannot emphasize enough that, when giving your bird fresh fruits and vegetables, you must clean/wash these foods even better than you would for yourselves. Agricultural techniques, transport, storage of these foods and display in the stores provide ample opportunity for the introduction of disease causing organisms or dangerous chemicals. Due to their metabolism and small size, in comparison to us, birds are much more subject to poisonings and illness from foods that were contaminated but would have no apparent effect on a person.

One big concern, and a topic that is regularly in the news, is bacterial contamination, particularly *E. coli*. There are countless other bacteria that can be present in food that can cause disease as well, so we are not just limited to *E. coli*, but *E. coli* seems to be the prominent organism in the news and implicated in outbreaks that have sickened people. *E. coli* is a Gram negative bacillus which is normal in the GI tract of man and most animals, with the exception of birds. Not all strains of *E. coli* are pathogenic and cause no problems in the GI tract. However, there are strains that can cause severe disease and sicken people. *E. coli* or other Gram negative bacteria are abnormal in the digestive tract of pet birds.

The presence of *E. coli* in food and water indicate fecal contamination. I am sure you recall when a beach has been closed due to a high coliform count, indicating contamination of the water with sewage. *E. coli* can also be found on produce as manure (feces) can be used as fertilizer in some parts of the world. There can also be contamination of the produce from feces of other animals on the farm. When there was the *E. coli* outbreak in bagged spinach in 2008, the source was believed to be cow (or possibly swine) feces. In addition, if the workers who are harvesting the produce do not practice proper hygiene there can be *E. coli* (fecal) contamination as they handle the crops. If the food is not stored properly there can also be *E. coli* contamination from exposure to rodents and their waste products. Even in the food stores, if proper safeguards are not taken contamination can occur at this level as well.

I am sure you are all probably a bit “grossed out” by this discussion, but that is my purpose. You have to consider the potential hazards of consuming produce that is inadequately cleaned for

your own consumption, but the danger is heightened in pet birds. Always be certain to deal with quality sources of produce and be certain it is clean and fresh. Make sure you clean it thoroughly, even better for your bird than you would for yourself and of course store it properly.

Contamination with chemicals is also a significant risk. Pesticides are more prevalent on foods than you would think. The Environmental Working Group released a list of pesticide levels in common fruits, ranking from 1 (lowest pesticide load) to 100 (highest load). These rankings were based on nearly 43,000 tests for pesticides conducted by the USDA. Onions had the lowest level, but avocados (BAD for birds) and asparagus were also low. The highest rankings were peaches (100), apples (89) and strawberries (82). Pears (65) made the top ten dirtiest, grapes (43) and oranges (42) had still elevated levels. Low levels were in blueberries (24), bananas (16) and pineapple (7). I included this information (from *Eat This, Not That. Supermarket Survival Guide* by David Zincenko) for your personal benefit so you can be an informed consumer but also to alert you to the risks that exist for you and your bird when you feed these fruits.

Other contaminants to consider include fertilizers that would be used, be they manure or chemical fertilizers. Certain food producers have solutions or chemical sanitizers to wash the produce after it is harvested, which at low levels may not be harmful to a person, but toxic to pet birds. Diligent cleaning of these foods is essential.

If you want to avoid many of these risks, consider feeding your birds organic produce. These foods are supposedly raised without fertilizers, pesticides or other chemicals. However, that does not mean that you should not clean organic foods thoroughly as well. Cleaning and proper storage are still excellent practices that should be followed with organics, as you do not really know what was involved in the raising of the food, processing, transport and storage

After reading all this you may decide to raise your own produce to feed your family and birds. You can control all aspects and raise the food in true organic fashion and have no worries, right? Well, no. The risks are definitely reduced but contaminants can still get in the foods as it is a “germy” world out there. There is environmental bacteria, contamination with feces from various varmints traipsing through your garden, Histoplasma (a disease organism carried in wild bird feces), parasite eggs that may end up in the garden, the list goes on. So even though you raise the food organically yourself, vigorous cleaning and proper storage are crucial. You should do it for yourself and your family’s safety, but even more thoroughly for your bird.

It is truly a shame when a bird suffers from a disease condition which could have easily been avoided by simple, good husbandry practices. There are many potential disease causing organisms and chemical contaminants which may be found on fresh produce, eliminate them so your bird can enjoy the benefits of a healthy diet without the risk of illness.