

Bird Exercise

Peter S. Sakas DVM,MS

Niles Animal Hospital and Bird Medical Center

7278 N. Milwaukee Ave. Niles, Ill. 60714

(847)-647-9325 FAX (847)-647-9325

www.nilesanimalhospital.com

One of the most significant problems we see in pet birds is malnutrition due to birds eating an exclusive seed diet which is high in fat. The result of this type of diet is obesity and development of fat deposits. Coupling a poor diet with limited exercise, through restriction in a small cage, a life shortening situation develops. A balanced diet is of utmost importance using commercial diets, such as pelleted bird foods or homemade formulations which provide a wide variety of nutritional foods. Vitamin and mineral supplements are recommended as well.

Proper diet is the first step for insuring a good quality of life for your bird. Exercise is also very important for the physical well-being as well as the mental health of the bird. Too often we see birds that are kept in small cages and rarely given freedom outside the cage. Sores can develop on the bottom of the feet due to improper perches, their feathers become soiled/tattered and the bird may develop vices such as feather picking or self-mutilation.

To be certain that your bird gets enough exercise, have a cage that is of the adequate size for the variety of bird. Ideally no cage is large enough. Provide the bird with adequate room to maneuver. A variety of perches/perch diameters strategically positioned inside the cage is essential for smaller birds such as canaries and finches which do not usually finger tame easily and rarely have the opportunity for activity outside the cage. These small birds rapidly flit from perch to perch so soft perches such as clothesline or rubber tubing make it easier on their feet.

However, your pet bird is more than a beautiful ornament to admire from afar, it is a social animal that needs to interact with you. One of the best ways to accomplish this and provide opportunity for exercise is activity outside the cage. I am not suggesting that you let your bird fly free in the home, engaging in "air-o-bic" activity, there are too many dangers that exist. Flying into windows, mirrors, open containers of water, ceiling fans or through open doors and windows have led to injury, death or escape of pet birds. If you are cautious, have "bird-proofed" the flight area and your bird is a capable flier with no past mishaps, the ability to fly can be a good source of exercise. But never leave your bird out when you are not at home- too many unfortunate accidents can occur. The bird should be caged for its own safety. When you are home to monitor the bird then such activity is fine.

The vast majority of birds are not provided free flight in their homes due to the aforementioned dangers. To further prevent the risk yet provide activity outside the cage, their flight feathers are professionally clipped (veterinarian, pet store, breeder) to restrict flight. How do you provide exercise for these birds? Once again activity outside the cage is essential. You can make or purchase a playground that can be placed ontop of the cage or in a "play area". There are many varieties of bird toys that can facilitate exercise, placing them on the playground or in the cage. Make sure the toy is sturdy enough for your bird, do not use toys designed for small birds with larger parrots. They can easily dismantle these and potentially could remove small pieces such as bells/hooks and impale these on their beaks.

In summary, exercise for pet birds is facilitated by having a large enough cage for free and easy movement, avoid cluttering the cage with excessive paraphernalia. Multiple perches are especially important for smaller birds that rapidly hop between perches. Various homemade or commercial toys can be used for exercise and beak activity both inside and outside the cage. One of the best opportunities for exercise is activity outside the cage, supervised and ideally in a "play area". If your bird has free flight take great caution to prevent potential injury situations.