

Grit

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Grit is a controversial subject. The most important consideration is that "grit" itself is not a mineral source, rather it is a means to aid in the digestion of food. Birds will eat bits of stone (or the gravel in grit) which will then collect in the gizzard (the second stomach of the bird). Food material enters the proventriculus (first stomach), is mixed with acids and continues into the gizzard where, with the assistance of grit and the hard, thickened lining of the gizzard, the food is ground up. The grit will then remain in the gizzard for long periods of time and does not need to be constantly replenished.

Do pet birds need grit to digest their food? No, generally they do not. Birds in the wild that eat hard foods require grit, but the diets we provide for our pet birds do not necessarily need grit to aid in their digestion. We have seen numerous birds in our practice that have never had grit provided to them in their lifetime and still digest their food adequately. Conversely, on rare occasions we have seen birds that were poorly digesting their food and the addition of grit seemed to help.

Birds do seem to enjoy grit and its presence has psychological benefits. My belief is that grit provided occasionally is fine and probably beneficial. It should be provided in a separate feed cup, not added into the food. Grit once a week for a short period of time is reasonable. If possible mineral grit is preferred as the minerals provided in addition to the grit is a definite nutritional requirement, the gravel possessing no nutritive value. Larger birds will chew lava stones and similar objects.

If a bird is eating excessive amounts of grit it could indicate a digestive tract disturbance or nutritional deficiency (perhaps a mineral deficiency). Sometimes bird owners believe the bird is eating when actually it may only be eating grit and not their food. Play close attention by monitoring their droppings. Excessive ingestion of grit could lead to impaction and/or blockage.

If a bird is being provided grit as a mineral source it could be shortchanging the bird nutritionally. Plain grit provides no needed minerals for the bird-mineral grit is preferred. Other excellent sources of minerals include, cuttlebone, mineral block, crushed oyster shells, bones, crushed egg shells, milk, cheese, and commercial preparations such as, Osteoform and Calciquid. Make sure the bird is provided with a source of minerals as it is one of the most common deficiencies we see in pet birds.