Synthetic Bird Feeds: Do They Promote Health or Disease?

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An apple is an apple is an apple, but is a nutrient, a nutrient a nutrient???

Today, a bird owner can go to any bird or pet shop in town and purchase a dry convenience diet out of a bag or canister. It is that easy. The majority of bird owners feed these diets to their birds either as a portion of the diet or as a total diet on a daily basis. The sad part of this is that bird owners are taught to believe that this is the proper diet to feed their birds and that these diets are actually superior to a diet made up of natural whole foods. Gasp!

Why is it that nutritionists and medical doctors are currently recommending that humans include more fruits (2-4 servings) and vegetables (3-5 servings) in their daily diet to preserve health and prevent disease, yet most veterinarians are telling their bird-owning clients to feed more pellets to do the same?

Feeding pellets that contain all of the essential nutrients will provide your bird with “everything” it needs to maintain health. It sounds like a good idea in theory. After all, it is “complete nutrition” in a bag. Right? What a cool concept. Each and every bite your bird consumes will contain all the nutrients it needs, except the parts that crumble to the floor. Oops!

Think about it carefully. Can feeding your birds with this “complete nutrition” really fulfill all of your birds’ needs? I’m sure those of you who hate to cook or to prepare meals hope with all your might that it is true.

Well, two large studies performed by the National Cancer Institute designed to prove the worth of beta carotene supplements have shown that isolated nutrients do not always control disease or offer any health benefits (Time, "Medicine," January 29, 1996). In fact, they were shown in some cases to make a condition such as cancer or heart disease worse, not better.

Another study published in the New England Journal of Medicine (Spring 1994) researchers concluded that synthetic vitamin E and beta carotene did not improve the health of those who experienced a stroke, lung cancer and other diseases.

Clearly, taking a simple isolated chemical supplement is not the same as eating a vegetable and a variety of...
other fresh whole foods. Scientists
know that there are other natural
ingredients that work with vitamins to
promote health, such as is the case
with vitamin C and bioflavonoids.
They work synergistically for the opti­
mum health results, not only to pre­
vent disease, but also to cure it.

Many of you will find this hard to
believe, but ascorbic acid is not vitamin
C, although to simplify things the liter­
ature does refer to it as such. Instead,
vitamin C in its complexity is mainly
composed of tyrosinase (which sup­
dplies organic copper), bioflavonoids,
and ascorbic acid (the antioxidant por­
tion that protects the other two from
spoilage). In fact, tyrosinase is the
active ingredient of vitamin C. The
tyrosinase in vitamin C converts tyro­
sine to thyroid and adrenal hormones.

In an effort to make products quickly,
inexpensively, and in great quanti­
ties, scientists continue to isolate what
they believe is the active ingredient of
nutritional complexes, copy them in
mirror images of crystalline pure
chemicals and mass-produce them as
“foods” or nutritional supplements. An
overdose of vitamin C or any isolated
nutrient for that matter can weaken
your system because without its syner­
gistic parts to work efficiently and
effectively it must drain the body’s
own supplies.

If your bird’s body were mildly defi­
cient in copper, too much ascorbic
acid could create a copper deficiency,
which can negatively affect the
immune system. If you will take a clos­
er look at synthetic nutrients, you will
see their failure to aid in optimum
health and, in some disease states, see
a worsening of symptoms.

So offering your birds a pelleted
diet is similar to taking a bottle of syn­
thetic multi-vitamins and grinding the
pills up in a blender and pouring it
into your birds’ food bowl each day. How
long would you suspect that
your bird would remain healthy if you
did this every day?

Well, I suspect each bird would react
differently depending on its individual
biochemistry and constitution, but I cer­
tainly wouldn’t expect my birds to live
nearly as long and would also suspect
that they may be getting more than
enough of some nutrients and not
enough of others. Consequently, dis­
ease, infection and perhaps malnutri­
tion would not be too far away.

Rats and other laboratory animals
are fed a diet similar to a pelleted
diet, but they are not expected to live a long
enough life for it to matter much what
they eat. I often refer to a pelleted diet
as a fabricated diet, a lab diet, or a
processed diet. These terms do not
sound appetizing to me. How about
you?

In the Journal of the American
Dietetic Association (March 21, 1940) it
was reported that “synthetic vitamins
should be used with caution in order
to prevent the development of defi­
cencies more serious than the defi­
cency we set out to control.”

The truth of the matter is that the
scientific community has long known
that whole food complexes are superior
to artificial nutrients and that syn­
thetic nutrients act more like drugs, not
real vitamins. Common sense tells us
this, but the argument still remains
between those who refuse to believe or
understand that real foods will always
be superior to a synthetic
chemical diet.

The healing power of fresh whole
foods cannot be denied. Natural nutri­
ent complexes are found only in raw
whole foods. Isolated nutrients are
patently pharmaceuticals, not phyto­
ceuticals. Fractionated nutrients are not
natural and therefore, cannot provide
the same health benefits as whole food
complexes.

Despite what feed manufacturers
tell you, synthetic nutrients are not
exactly the same as real or natural food
source vitamins. In fact, they are chem­
icals of one isolated portion of a vita­
mamin fraction, and even that fraction is
not the same as is found in nature. It is
instead a mirror image which is identi­
cal, but in reverse.

So the next time someone tells you
that synthetic nutrients are exactly the
same as real vitamins from food
sources (exact mirror images), you can
tell them that it is virtually impossible
for mirror-image synthetic nutrients to
combine with other nutrients in order
to be properly utilized by the body. In
order for this to happen the diet must
contain the appropriate nutritional
components.

I strongly suggest that you read all
labels of all food products before you
serve them to your birds. Chances are
very good that you won’t want your
birds to eat them after all and you will
be eagerly on your way to the nearest
supermarket to buy your birds an
abundance of natural whole foods.

Alicia McWatters resides in New Mexico
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