

# Canary

*Serinus canaria*



**LIFE SPAN:** Typically 8-15 years

**AVERAGE SIZE:** 4-6 inches, 15-30 grams

**PET SUPPLIES PLUS**  
GREAT PRICES. NO GUESSING.

written by an expert in the pet care industry and approved by a board-certified avian veterinarian

the information on this care sheet is a basic overview and not a substitute for veterinary care. For more information and to find a qualified avian veterinarian, go to [www.AAV.org](http://www.AAV.org).

**WILD AND DOMESTIC HISTORY:** Native to the Canary Islands, off the northwest coast of Africa, canaries were brought to Europe by Spanish sailors. There are three kinds of canaries: color-bred, "type" (shape/conformation) and song canaries. The modern canary, domesticated from the wild songbird, can be traced back to Victorian-era England and Germany, where many of these favorite variations were developed. Well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, canaries were used as sentinels in coal mines, alerting miners of toxic gases such as carbon monoxide. Some of the popularity of the canary as a pet derived from miners "showing off" their birds to each other.

**PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS:** Canaries are small passerine songbirds in the finch family. Canaries exist in a wide variety of colors including white, red, yellow, green, beige, black, rose, bronze, brown and orange. Age of sexual maturity is about 9 months. Canaries are not sexually dimorphic, which means males and females are not visually different. Mature male canaries do usually sing, which will usually reveal the sex of the bird. Females have a simple, sweet "cheep" sound. Male canaries learn their sweet, intricate songs from their fathers and other male members of the family. They can also pick up pieces of songs from outside songbirds or from recordings of canaries. Each segment of a tune that they learn will be incorporated into their own personal song.

**NORMAL BEHAVIOR & INTERACTION:** Canaries are energetic, sweet-tempered birds. They will happily hop from perch to perch and are a joy to watch. However, they can be territorial, so if you have a group of canaries, be prepared to separate one or two out into individual cages if they begin to pick on one another. Canaries do not enjoy being handled, although some keepers have trained them to sit on a finger.

**DIET:** Canaries benefit from a good quality pellet diet in addition to their seed mix. A seed-only diet can result in nutrient deficiency and diseases such as liver, kidney and heart disease, as well as obesity, all of which can severely shorten the life expectancy of your pet. Pelleted diets have been carefully formulated to meet the specific needs of your canary. If your bird is not used to pellets, they can be mixed with seed. As time goes on, you can slowly convert your bird to a majority of pellet and fresh food diet.

Some canary diets are also fortified with specific nutrients, such as vitamin A foods that will enhance the colors of some of the red, orange and yellow colored canaries.

Your canary should also be offered fresh vegetables, fruit and grains daily. You can also offer "egg food" or cooked egg as a good source of protein and vitamin A (be sure to include the yolk). Remember that vitamin A foods found in the red and orange fruits and vegetables (carrots, sweet potato) will enhance the color of a brightly hued canary. Canaries often enjoy leafy greens and can be offered in small bunches or chopped finely. Be sure to remove any fresh foods that have not been eaten within a 24-hour period.

Never feed your canary chocolate, sugary/fried foods, avocado, or junk food. See our **Avian Nutrition** Handout for more information!

**SUPPLEMENTS:** If your bird is eating a balanced diet, the only supplement that you will need is calcium. Calcium can usually be offered in the form of a cuttlebone or mineral block. Do not use gravel or grit as it can cause impactions. For optimal calcium metabolism, your bird will need some UVB exposure for at least 3-4 hours a day. Careful outdoor sun exposure or indoor UV lighting is recommended (see our **UV Lighting** handout).

**WATER:** Clean, fresh water must always be available and should be changed daily. All water should ideally be free of fluorine, chlorine and heavy metals. We recommend that you use unflavored bottled drinking water or bottled natural spring water. If tap water is used, you should treat it with a water conditioner. If you do not want to chemically de-chlorinate the water, you can leave an open container of tap water out for at least 24 hours with exposure to ultraviolet light. Do not use distilled water, which can cause severe medical problems, since it lacks minerals that are essential to important body functions.

Because your bird will often even bathe or dunk food in its water, it must be checked/changed several times a day. It is recommended that the bowl be wiped clean with a paper towel at every change to prevent a slimy film (bacteria) from collecting on the inside of the bowl. Thoroughly wash the bowl with a mild dishwashing detergent and water at least once a day.

**HOUSING & ENVIRONMENT:** Canaries need a clean, warm, mentally stimulating environment. One bird should have a cage no smaller than 18"x18"x18". Two birds should have a cage measuring at least 24"x18"x18" inches. Do not purchase a round cage. The basic rule of thumb is the bigger the better! Canaries are very active and like to flit back & forth as much as possible. Remember that birds fly horizontally, not vertically like a helicopter! Choose a cage that allows that natural movement. The spacing between the bars of the cage should be no wider than 3/8 inch to a 1/2 inch.

The cage should be placed in a family-centered room where the bird will feel like a part of the "flock"; however, the back of the cage should be positioned against a wall to provide security. Avoid drafty areas and any placement that will get too much direct sun for any portion of the day. If your bird spends time out of its cage, make sure that any ceiling fans are off. Do not place your bird's cage in the kitchen, as cooking fumes and even a small amount of smoke can be fatal. Average room temperature will be fine for your bird, not

to exceed 80 degrees. Be careful of drafts from air conditioning, especially when bathing and misting.

Perches of varying materials and types should be included in the cage, such as wood dowel, natural branch type, cotton rope or a cement perch. Having different sizes will exercise the feet and prevent sores and foot-related health issues. We do not recommend sandpaper covered perches as they are too abrasive for bird feet.

At least three clean bowls should be ready for use: one for fresh water, one for dry pellets/seed and one for fresh foods.

Use newspapers to line the bottom of the cage. It is easy to change and you can monitor your bird's feces daily. We do not recommend sandpaper floor paper or corn cob bedding. Corn cob can be ingested and cause obstructions and can grow molds on moist foods and feces.

We recommend against using mite protectors due to the potential for respiratory irritation (fortunately feather mites are not common in canaries). In addition, a smoke-free household is best for bird and owner!

Your bird may appreciate a cage cover for nighttime. The cover can block out any extraneous light and create a more secure sleeping place. Be careful not to use any fabrics for your cover that your bird might catch its claws or beak in, or that it might pull strings from and ingest.

Canaries will enjoy picking at small toys made of leather strips or sturdy string.

#### **RECOMMENDED SUPPLIES:**

- Cage
- Perches
- Dishes
- Toys
- Misting bottle and/or dish for birdbath
- Nail clipper & styptic powder
- Pellet diet
- Treats
- Calcium supplement
- Fluorescent UVB Bulb and housing
- Cage cover

**CAGE MAINTENANCE:** Your canary's cage should be checked daily. Feces and spoiled food should be wiped clean of perches, cups and cage bars consistently to prevent health problems. Cage paper can be changed every to every-other day.

The entire cage should be cleaned thoroughly at least once every month with:

- A mild dishwashing liquid in warm water
- Vinegar & water (1:8) or bleach and warm water (1:32)
- Cage "furniture" should also be scrubbed clean with the same dilution.
- Rinse off all soap and bleach thoroughly with plain water before re-introducing your pet to its enclosure.
- NEVER MIX VINEGAR AND BLEACH - IT CREATES A TOXIC SOLUTION

**GROOMING & HYGIENE:** All birds should be gently misted with a water bottle dedicated to this use only. In addition to misting, a shallow dish (2-3 inches deep) for bird bath should be offered to your bird at least twice weekly.

Be sure to take your bird to your avian veterinarian for regular nail trims. *Never* use styptic powder on your bird's skin-nails only!

**SIGNS OF A HEALTHY BIRD:** A healthy bird should be perky, active and alert with bright, clear eyes, and nostrils. You should observe your bird eating and drinking throughout the day. Your bird should appear well groomed with neat, bright feathers. The feathers should be mostly smoothed to the body at rest - not continually fluffed. The feet and legs should be smooth and free of lumps, scabs and rough scales. Canaries vocalize regularly with chirps and beeps. Your bird should be interested in singing, but may be shy or intimidated around new people or in new environments. A healthy bird is confident and inquisitive, although cautious and aware as well. We recommend your bird be seen by an avian vet for yearly health exams.

Male canaries sing to attract a mate, so if a male-female pair is kept together, the male will stop singing. Canaries will also become quiet during the summer molting season. Absent the introduction of a mate or the onset of molting season, if a male canary suddenly stops singing, he should be taken to a veterinarian, since this can be a sign of illness. Also, a canary molting outside out of season may have a health concern and the bird should be taken to a veterinarian. Possible causes of an out of season molt may be that the bird is receiving too many hours of daylight or that temperatures are too warm.

#### **SOME COMMON HEALTH PROBLEMS THAT REQUIRE VETERINARY EVALUATION INCLUDE:**

- Fluffed feathers, missing patches of feathers, feathers being purposely plucked.
- Evidence that your bird has stopped grooming.
- Bird sitting still and low on perch with a puffed-up appearance, drooping wings; may also stay at bottom of cage.
- Beak swelling or unusual marks on cere.
- Nasal discharge, eye discharge, wheezing or coughing.
- Any change in stools including color or consistency.
- Loss of appetite.
- Favoring of one foot, holding a wing differently, presence of any blood.

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