

# Cockatiel

*Nymphicus hollandicus*



**LIFE SPAN:** up to about 25 years

**AVERAGE SIZE:** 11-14 inches long, 90 grams

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

written by an expert in the pet care veterinarian and 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 HISTORY:** Cockatiels are native to the grasslands of Australia. Wild cockatiels are predominately grey and white with bright orange cheek patches, which are brighter on the male. Age of sexual maturity is 4-6 months. Cockatiels are sexually dimorphic, which means males and females are visually different. All cockatiels have the markings of a female until they are six months old, after that, the males lose these features. Female cockatiels have small white dots on the tops of the tips of their flight feathers and barring or stripes on the undersides of their wings and tail. Male cockatiels also have brighter orange cheek patches, a solid grey tail and usually have a greater ability to talk.

**PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS:** Cockatiels are beautiful, small-bodied birds that have varied colorations (mutations) which range from all grey to all white. Some popular types are: grey, lutino, white-faced, cinnamon, pied, pearl and albino. A single bird can also be a combination of any of these color patterns.

Cockatiels have a proud posture, small dark eyes and a long tail. All cockatiels have a head crest, which the bird can raise or lower depending on mood and stimulation. They also have a high level of powder down in their feathers. Because of this, people with allergies or asthma should consider a less powdery bird.

## **NORMAL PARROT BEHAVIOR AND INTERACTION:**

Cockatiels are extremely intelligent, sweet, family oriented birds. They will get along wonderfully in a home with a large family or a single owner. They may be kept as a single bird or in a flock of two or more. Cockatiels can be good talkers, especially males, however their voices may be a bit gravelly - so sometimes their talents are overlooked. When not "talking", they perform lovely songs not unlike an American robin's morning tune, or they chirp happily to communicate with their families.

Parrots are flock-oriented animals, and they do well with other birds in the home to communicate with. However, you and your family become part of your bird's flock as well. Some parrots often get labeled as "one person birds." Although this may sometimes seem to be the case, many members of the household can have a good relationship with

the family bird. Because most parrots mate for life in the wild, it is natural to choose one person to have that closest relationship with.

Every parrot, even within the same species, has his or her own personality. Some parrots are very bold and interactive, and some are subdued and shy. The more you work with your parrot, the more comfortable it will become and the more his or her own personality will emerge. A hand-raised cockatiel is an excellent first parrot for a responsible child.

**DIET:** Contrary to popular belief, parrots do not live by seed (or nuts) alone! A seed/nut-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 the pet parrot. 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.

Your cockatiel should also be offered fresh vegetables, fruit and grains daily. Cockatiels also eat insects in the wild, so provide small portions of cooked egg, chicken, beans or other healthy protein. Be sure to remove any fresh foods that have not been eaten within a 24-hour period.

Never feed your parrot chocolate, sugary/fried foods, avocado, or junk food. Good treats include Lafebers<sup>®</sup> Nutri-berries<sup>®</sup> or Avi-Cakes.<sup>®</sup> 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:** Cockatiels need a clean, warm, mentally stimulating environment. A single bird's cage can be about 18" x 18" x 24." Two birds should have a cage no smaller than 28"x 24"x 36." Select a powder-coated or stainless steel parrot cage, free of rust and chips; cage bar spacing no wider than 3/8 to 1 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 mites are not common in parrots). 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.

**ENRICHMENT:** In the wild, parrots spend most of their day from morning until night flying and foraging for food. They also use their beaks constantly to chew open fruit and nuts. For the domestic parrot, their food is right at their beaks and this provides limited physical and mental enrichment.

At least three different types of toys should be available to your bird. Purchase cockatiel size-appropriate toys, and remember that parrot toys are meant to be destroyed! Parrots enjoy shiny, wooden, cotton rope, and plastic toys. It is very important to purchase toys made specifically for parrots as they are much more likely to be safer in construction and material. Be sure to include foraging toys. These types of toys mimic the work that a bird might do to find food in the wild. Hide treats in cardboard tubes and balled up paper or purchase plastic puzzle toys, which force your pet to work for its treats!

Several types of "play places" should be available for safe supervised, out-of-cage playtime. A play gym and portable T-stand can allow your bird to spend time with you in different rooms. Supervised flying and walking/climbing is an excellent daily physical requirement.

#### RECOMMENDED SUPPLIES:

- Cage
- Perches
- Dishes
- Toys
- Play gym or T-stand
- Misting bottle and/or large crock for birdbath

- Nail clipper & styptic powder
- Pellet diet
- Treats
- Calcium supplement
- Fluorescent UVB Bulb and housing
- Cage cover

**CAGE MAINTENANCE:** Your parrot'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. Check the metal parts & bars of your bird's cage periodically for chipped paint and rust, which can cause serious health issues if your bird chews or swallows any flaked pieces.

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. Some birds enjoy going in the shower with their owners. In addition to misting, a crock/bowl 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 and wing trims. Because cockatiels are light-bodied birds, their wings may need to be trimmed significantly to avoid escape. *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. Parrots vocalize regularly with chirps, clicks, whistles and learned words. Your bird should be interested in communicating, 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.

#### 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.