



Cockatiels

AAV Companion Bird Care Series

Cockatiels (*Nymphicus hollandicus*) are medium-sized, trim birds that are native to Australia. They are the most popular companion bird in the US. They adapt well to captivity. Although color mutations are highly valued by some aviculturists, some believe the inbreeding required to produce unusual colors has actually resulted in some negative genetic disorders, including decreased disease resistance, reduced life span, and hatching defects. Fifteen different color mutations are recognized in aviculture, including normal gray, pied, pearl, cinnamon, white-faced, lutino, albino, silver and yellow-cheeked cockatiels.

Vital Statistics

Total length: 12.5 inches (32 cm)

Body weight: 75-120 g

Age of sexual maturity: 6-12 months

Maximum life span: 30 years

Common Disorders of Cockatiels

- Injuries from collisions or other pets
- Respiratory disease (sneezing, nasal discharge, clogged nostrils, open-beak breathing)
- Liver disease (abnormal feather color, swollen abdominal area)
- Gastrointestinal disease
- Heavy metal poisoning (lead or zinc)
- Feather destructive behavior
- Broken and bleeding emerging (blood) feathers
- Obesity
- Intestinal parasites

Many diseases can be prevented with regular veterinary care, proper diet and housing. For these reasons, it is important to develop a relationship with a veterinarian who is experienced in avian preventive care, medicine and surgery.

For help in finding an avian veterinarian in your area, contact the Association of Avian Veterinarians (AAV) by visiting www.AAV.org and click on "Find-a-Vet."

What to Expect from Your Cockatiel

Cockatiels are relatively quiet, nondestructive, entertaining birds that are easy to care for. Because they are considered so gentle, they are excellent companion birds for children. They have expressive crest feathers, which can make reading their body language easier. Cockatiels are limited talkers, but some male birds are so good at whistling that their tunes are recognizable. Social stimulation and interaction from their owners or by being kept in a group is necessary for their mental well-being.

Is Your Cockatiel a Male or a Female?

Immature gray cockatiels have yellow spots under the primary wing feathers and bars under the tail feathers. A male loses these bars around 9 months of age. Head and facial markings are often brighter on males. Color mutations (lutino, pied, pearl) may not show the same reliable gender differences in feather pattern. Vocalization is the earliest means of sexing cockatiels—the male has a melodious call and may learn to imitate words and songs. Females have more of a monotonous chirp. Cockatiels are prolific breeders, so unwanted reproduction should be prevented by housing same-sex pairs or carefully managing the environment to reduce reproductive behaviors.

What Should You Feed Your Cockatiel?

Cockatiels are granivorous in the wild and rely heavily on close to 30 different seeds and grains in addition to vegetables, fruits, and occasional insects. In captivity it is felt that they benefit from being offered a formulated diet, followed by a quality seed mix, as well as vegetables and fruit as part of their offerings.

Are Cockatiels Tame?

Young, hand-raised cockatiels adapt readily to new surroundings and handling procedures. They should be exposed to novel situations (car travel, hospital visits, multiple household visitors, other pets) early in life so they are well-adjusted to these events. Gently handled and well-socialized cockatiels usually make outstanding pets.

What Do Cockatiels Do All Day?

Cockatiels are less likely to play with toys, but enjoy the company of other cockatiels. While they can be kept as single pets, single birds benefit from attention from their human flock members. Toys must be sturdy and free of toxic metals, hooks, sharp objects, and easily consumed components. Small-diameter, fresh-cut branches from nontoxic, pesticide-free trees can be provided. In the wild, cockatiels are ground feeders and often prefer foraging and exploration opportunities on the cage bottom.

How to Identify Your Bird

Cockatiels occasionally escape outdoors, and permanent identification may help to return birds to their owners. One method used to permanently identify your bird is implantation of a microchip, as is performed in other pets. Some birds already have leg bands for identification. Although closed leg bands seldom cause injury, some owners prefer to have them removed.

Should the Wings Be Clipped?

The decision to clip wings or allow free flight should be made carefully. Birds allowed free flight benefit from exercise and mental stimulation; however, free flying birds may be injured by hitting windows or ceiling fans or hurt by encountering toxic materials. With careful planning and training, some birds may be allowed free flight in a safe area. The goal of clipping the wings is not to make the bird incapable of flight, but to prevent it from developing rapid and sustained flight and to prevent escape. Clipping must be done carefully and tailored to each individual to prevent flight and injuries from falling.

How to Keep Your Cockatiel Healthy, Happy and Safe!

- Take your cockatiel to your veterinarian immediately after purchase, then at least once every 6-12 months for examinations.
- Provide stimulating environmental enrichment by offering toys, social interaction, and foraging opportunities.
- Feed a high quality, seed-based or formulated diet with fresh or dried fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.
- Provide clean, fresh, uncontaminated drinking water and change frequently. Cockatiels can be trained to use a water bottle.
- Although cockatiels are not usually prolific bathers, weekly bathing and misting opportunities are recommended at minimum.
- Avoid spraying house with insecticides.

Housing for Your Cockatiel Should:

- Be as large as possible.
- Recommended bar spacing: 1/2 inch to 5/8 inch.
- Be clean, secure, and safe.
- Be constructed of nontoxic materials (some cages may contain heavy metals, such as zinc).
- Contain variably sized perches made of clean, nontoxic, pesticide-free wood or branches.
- Have easy-to-clean food and water containers.
- Have perches not placed directly over food or water bowls.
- Offer opportunities for protected outdoor exposure to fresh air, direct sunlight, and exercise.

Essential Safety Tips

Cockatiels are very curious and will investigate anything new in their environment. That is why it is important to prevent their access to:

- Ceiling fans
- Stove tops with hot burners, pans, or skillets
- Fumes from overheated non-stick cookware
- Sandpaper-covered perches
- Tobacco and cigarette smoke
- Chocolate, avocado, salt, alcohol
- Toxic houseplants
- Pesticides or chemical cleaners
- Easily dismantled toys
- Dogs, cats, and unsupervised children
- Sources of heavy metals, such as lead or zinc (stained glass windows, pewter, some mini blinds, or linoleum)
- Plug-in air fresheners
- Scented candles

What Your Veterinarian Looks for in a Healthy Cockatiel

Dry, open nares

Smooth beak

Alert, erect posture

Smooth, bright feathers that are not ragged, discolored or broken

Clear, bright eyes (no discharge)

Good body condition

Even pattern of skin on the feet, nails of appropriate length



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