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CANARY CARE

The canary (*Serinus canaria*) is a small cage bird of the finch family well known for their melodious song. Canaries originated from the Canary Islands, where monks are thought to have started breeding them in the 1400s, resulting in the large variety of colours and types found today. They make good pets, being tidy, easy to care for and non-destructive but are not generally keen on being handled. Canaries are sexually monomorphic, meaning that they can only be definitively sexed by DNA testing, from a blood sample or feather pluck. However male canaries tend to have a good singing voice whereas females mainly chirp or whistle.

HOUSING

- Canaries will be happiest in a spacious aviary set up. This can be indoors or outdoors. Outdoor enclosures should be made of strong wire mesh (which should be zinc free), with an easily cleanable floor and plenty of room for the birds to fly around. In addition to the flying area, a sheltered warm sleeping area should be provided to protect from the worst of the British weather. There should also be the facility to provide supplementary heating in the winter. The shelter should also provide shade on sunny days. Perches can be placed at varying heights around the enclosure with branches of different diameters providing the most natural set up. It is also particularly important to ensure that the enclosure is secure, both to stop the birds getting out (double security doors are the best way to prevent an escape) and to stop predators getting in.
- Alternatively, if kept indoors, a large cage can be set up. This must be large enough to allow the bird to stretch its wings in all directions (as an absolute minimum) and ideally large enough to allow flight. The cage should be made of non-toxic material and be zinc free. It should be placed out of direct sunlight and draughts and situated away from any item that may give off toxic fumes. Certain household products such as tobacco smoke, Teflon from non-stick frying pans, air freshener plug-ins and deodorants can lead to irritation of the bird's respiratory tract and in some cases can be fatal.
- We recommend changing the perches that are supplied with most cages (usually wooden dowel or plastic) to natural tree branches. Fruit trees are preferred and these should be washed thoroughly with an appropriate disinfectant before use. Natural tree branches prevent all of the common foot injuries that we see and prevent nail overgrowth. Sand paper perch covers should not be used as they simply abrade the feet and do not keep the nails short.
- Ultraviolet lighting is important for birds, being required both for natural behaviour and calcium metabolism. Specific bird lamps are available and have recognised health benefits. A good review of bird lighting can be found on the Arcadia website www.arcadia-bird.com/uv-lighting/. A bird lamp should be fitted above the cage to reflect light downwards as a bright light hitting the side of the bird can cause eye irritation.

- Different toys should be added and changed regularly to entertain birds. When purchasing toys or cages always make sure that they are “zinc-free” as zinc poisoning is increasingly seen in captive birds. Be careful as some fixings can contain zinc but yet the toy is zinc free. Household items such as keys, old paintwork, and lead weights can contain heavy metals and be potential sources of toxicity.
- Free flight is an essential requirement and birds should be given the opportunity for regular exercise. It is however, important to ensure that the room they are allowed to fly around is totally secure with all windows, doors and chimneys blocked off, heaters and fans turned off and any potentially poisonous house plants removed. If started young, birds can be trained to perch on a finger and returned to the cage.
- The cage or aviary should be cleaned out at least once a week to help prevent disease and a suitable disinfectant used (e.g. F10).

WHAT TO FEED

- In the wild, these birds eat a wide variety of seeds. In captivity seed mixes can be provided but most of the common mixtures contain millet seed which can be high in fat and low in essential vitamins and minerals. Alternatively, good quality complete pellet diets (e.g. Harrison’s fine or superfine pellets) are now available, which can provide a much better balance of nutrients. Some fresh green food should also be fed such as seeding
- grasses, dandelions, chickweeds and groundsel. It is important however, to ensure that these are from non-polluted sites and washed thoroughly before feeding.
- A cuttlefish bone should be provided for additional calcium and to allow the bird to wear down its beak. Grit can also be provided to aid with digestion of food but is not thought to be essential.
- Fresh water should always be available both for drinking, and in a shallow saucer for bathing.

ANNUAL HEALTH CHECKS

- We recommend annual health checks for pet birds as medical problems are more easily treated if detected at an early stage

INSURANCE

- We highly recommend that you take out a pet insurance policy. For a monthly fee your pet can receive the best treatment at an affordable cost. There is normally an excess to pay for each condition then after that costs are covered up to a set limit. Once you have the policy, please provide us with a copy of your insurance details.