



655 W Citracado Parkway, Escondido, California 92025 Phone: 760-745-8115 Fax: 760-745-7814  
www.aahc.us aahc-info@aahc.us

## YOUR NEW SMALL MAMMAL: THE INITIAL VISIT

Many owners of rodents, ferrets, chinchillas, sugar gliders, and hedgehogs are surprised to learn that all pets need an initial visit by a veterinarian and at least an annual checkup (a number of veterinarians who treat exotic small animals actually recommend checkups at least twice a year, to allow for early detection and treatment of potentially life-threatening diseases.) Regular veterinary care is necessary in order to ensure your pet lives a long, healthy life. The most important visit is the very first one, right after you acquire your pet. During this visit, the veterinarian will perform a physical examination and various diagnostic testing, to determine your pet's state of health and see if your pet might be harboring any diseases that require treatment. The visit should also include a thorough discussion of proper feeding, housing, care, and grooming of your new pet. The most important part of this initial visit is to feel comfortable with the doctor and the hospital staff. Make sure your pet's veterinarian is qualified to treat small mammals. Exotic pet medicine has become a specialized part of veterinary medicine, and most general practitioners are not comfortable or knowledgeable in exotic pet medicine. Ask the doctor about his qualifications.



### ***Parts of the Small Mammal Checkup***

While each doctor has his own protocol on what is done during the annual or twice yearly checkup, the following tests may be recommended to keep your pet healthy.



Many exotic pet veterinarians recommend performing some or all of these tests under short-acting gas anesthesia, using an anesthetic like isoflurane or sevoflurane, depending upon the species of pet and temperament of the pet. Most small mammals can be safely anesthetized for the short period of time needed to perform the diagnostic testing. It is usually much easier and safer to perform procedures on exotic pets under anesthesia, as they are not stressed out when anesthetized and stress is a major factor in exotic pets dying when handled.

**Physical Examination** - Every visit starts with a thorough physical examination. During the physical, the doctor will record your pet's weight, general appearance, and mobility. He will palpate (feel) various parts of the pet's body. Any abnormalities that are noted or changes that have occurred since the previous visit may indicate the need for specialized testing.

**Blood Testing** - Just as your regular visit includes blood testing, so does a checkup for pets. Blood testing can include a complete blood count (examining the red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets) and serum biochemical profile (which looks at various organ enzymes.)

**Fecal Analysis** - Microscopic examination of the feces allows detection of parasites (coccidian and worms.)

**Microbiological Testing** - Occasionally additional tests such as a culture and sensitivity or a skin scraping may be needed to determine the cause of various problems in small mammals.

**Radiological Testing** - Using X-rays the doctor can examine your pet's body for abnormalities in the size, shape, and position of body organs; screen for masses such as tumors or granulomas; look for abnormal fluid accumulation; and check the bones and joints.



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*This client information sheet is based on material written by Rick Axelson, DVM & Shawn Messonnier, DVM*

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