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COMMON DISEASES OF PET RODENTS

What are some of the common diseases of pet rodents?

Common conditions of pet rodents include respiratory diseases, anorexia and lethargy, overgrown teeth, and tumors.

What are the signs of these diseases?

Respiratory infections are commonly seen in pet rodents. Signs include nasal and/or ocular (eye) discharge in mild infections, and wheezing, coughing, and open-mouth breathing in severe infections (pneumonia). The sicker animals often stop eating and become lethargic. *Bordetella* is one such bacterium that affects guinea pigs; it can be fatal. Since rabbits carry this organism without showing signs of illness, it is recommended that rabbits and guinea pigs not be housed together. In mice and rats, this is often caused by a mycoplasma, a type of bacterium. Other agents, such as *Pasteurella* and *Streptococcus* bacteria, can also cause pneumonia. Regardless of the exact cause of respiratory disease in pet rodents, respiratory infections are common. Anything that predisposes the pet to a respiratory infection (such as dusty cage substrate or dirty substrate that holds in ammonia from the pet's urine) should be corrected to lessen the incidence of respiratory problems.



Anorexia and lethargy are among the most common signs seen in sick pet rodents. Unfortunately, while this type of complaint does confirm that SOMETHING is wrong, it doesn't tell your veterinarian WHAT is wrong. ANY disease can cause an animal to not feel good. As with other exotic pets, the sooner a sick rodent is seen and treated, the better the prognosis (chance of cure).

All rodents have teeth that grow continuously throughout their lives; occasionally these teeth grow too long and cause the pet to stop eating. Sometimes you might see your pet drooling or having a wet chin ("slobbers"). Often the front teeth, the incisors, have overgrown and are interfering with eating. Sometimes the back teeth, the molars, have overgrown and make eating painful.

Cancer is often seen in pet rodents, most commonly as external tumors. Mammary tumors are probably the most common type of cancer seen; mammary tumors are especially common in pet rats and mice. Amazingly, breast tissue in these pets covers most of the body, so breast cancer can appear anywhere on the body, even as a lump on the back of the pet!

How are rodent diseases treated?

Respiratory diseases are easily diagnosed based on clinical signs; radiographs can be used to confirm a diagnosis, and antibiotic treatment is indicated. Supportive care in the hospital, including force-feeding and fluid therapy, may be needed for pets with serious infections such as pneumonia.

Anorexia and lethargy are signs of disease and not a disease per se. Successfully treating rodents with anorexia and lethargy requires an accurate diagnosis; often this is not possible due to the cost of advanced diagnostics and the limited ability to perform certain diagnostic tests, such as the difficulty encountered when trying to draw blood from most pet rodents.

Regardless of any signs of disease in your pet rodent, pet store antibiotics are ineffective against diseases of pocket pets and should NEVER be used.



Overgrown teeth need to be trimmed. Trimming the incisors is done under anesthesia with a Dremel™ tool. In the past, nail clippers or wire cutters were used without anesthesia, but often broken teeth resulted, leading to more problems. The diagnosis of overgrown molars (back teeth) usually requires anesthesia and radiographs (X-rays); treatment is trimming of the molars (which is often difficult) under anesthesia. The disease can often be prevented by offering something for the pet to chew, such as a block of wood.

Tumors are removed surgically under anesthesia. Intra-abdominal tumors can often be removed, but the procedure is more difficult than for removal of external tumors. The earlier the tumor is removed, the easier the surgery.

How can I tell if my pet rodent is sick?

Signs of disease in rodents are sometimes specific for a certain disease. Most commonly, however, signs are vague and non-specific, such as a rodent with anorexia (lack of appetite) and lethargy, which can be seen with many diseases including pneumonia, cancer, and even kidney or liver failure. ANY deviation from normal should be a cause for concern and requires immediate evaluation by your veterinarian.

