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OWNING A PET RODENT

General Information

Pet rodents (hamsters, rats, mice, gerbils, and guinea pigs) are very popular pets. They make good first pets for young children and as a rule require minimal care. Compared to dogs and cats, they have a shorter life span (2-5 years depending upon the species); young children should be told this so that the "sudden death" of a 3-year-old pet isn't unexpected. As with any pet, they do occasionally get sick, and their illnesses are often severe. All pet rodents should be examined by a qualified veterinarian within 48 hours of purchase. This "new pet" exam is critical to detect signs of disease and help new pet owners get off on the right foot. So many problems are caused by misinformation; the first veterinary visit can help prevent well-intentioned owners from doing the wrong thing and ultimately contributing to the pet's early death.

Interesting Anatomical Information

Common to all of the pet rodents is the fact that the front teeth, the incisors, grow continuously throughout the pet's life. Overgrown incisors are a common problem and can be prevented by allowing the pet access to pieces of wood and other chewing devices. Treatment involves trimming by your veterinarian, often under anesthesia.

Rodents are herbivorous animals, and the digestive tract is similar to that of other plant-eaters such as horses and cattle.

Guinea Pigs

No obvious tail is present.

Unlike other rodents, only one pair of mammary glands is present.



The guinea pig is the only pocket pet with premolar teeth. Unlike most animals, the young are precocious at birth, meaning they are fully developed, born with hair, and the eyes open.

Guinea pigs rarely bite, which makes them ideal pets. However, they do squeal when handled.

Mice

Porphyrin from the Harderian glands around the eyes causes tears and nasal secretions to appear red.

The spleen of males is larger than the spleen of females.

The mammary glands extend along the sides and back of the pet, and therefore breast cancer can appear as a lump ANYWHERE on the body.

Young mice are born hairless with their eyes closed.

Rats

Rats do not have tonsils or a gall bladder.



Similar to mice, rats have a Harderian gland that produces red tears and nasal secretions.

The young are born hairless with their eyes closed.

Hamsters

Hip glands, which appear as a black dot on each hip, are present in males. They are used for territorial marking and are poorly developed in females.

Hamsters have a cheek pouch on each side of the inside of the mouth. Food, and often baby hamsters, are temporarily stored here!

Hamsters are the most aggressive of all the pocket pets and often bite.

Hamsters can hibernate. A sleeping hamster should be awakened carefully!

Gerbils

Since gerbils are desert animals, they have a very low water requirement.

Due to the low water intake, gerbils urinate small amounts.

Gerbils usually mate for life; they should be paired before sexual maturity.

Many gerbils exhibit mild spontaneous seizures (epilepsy), especially when startled. These usually don't require treatment.

Gerbils have high blood cholesterol and lipid (fat) levels but do not show arteriosclerosis.

Selecting Your Pet

Most owners will buy their pet rodents locally through a pet store. Avoid sick-looking animals. Don't try to be a "Good Samaritan". Remember that, with exotic pets, if it looks sick, it's really dying! Trying to nurse a sick pet rodent back to health after purchasing it will rarely work. Just the stress of the new environment and feeding is often enough to kill it. So, start out right with a healthy pet. Always inquire about the guarantee in case the pet is found to be unhealthy.

The pet rodent should have no discharge from the eyes, nose, or mouth. If you can open the mouth (without being bitten!), make sure the front teeth, the incisors, have not overgrown (they

should form a nice, even fit). The animal should seem frisky and try to run and resist handling to some extent. No coughing, sneezing, or wheezing should be present. Examine the rectal area. It should be dry and free of diarrhea or caked-on stool. This is especially important for young hamsters; many baby hamsters at pet stores have a disease called "wet tail", which is usually fatal. Ask the employee for help in determining the animal's sex. Keep in mind that pet store employees may know little more than you about the pet: the sex can be correctly determined during your pet's first veterinary visit.

The First Veterinary Visit

Within 48 hours of your purchase, your pet should be examined by a veterinarian knowledgeable in the treatment of pet rodents. The visit includes determining the animal's weight, as well as checking lumps or bumps. The animal is examined for signs of dehydration and starvation. A fecal test is done to check for internal parasites. The veterinarian can also determine the sex of your pet. If all turns out well, your pet will be given a clean bill of health. Like all pets, pet rodents should be examined annually and have their feces tested for parasites during the annual visit.



Vaccinations

Pet rodents do not require vaccinations.