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## SPECIAL PROBLEMS OF PET RODENTS

### **General Information**

Rodents have several unique problems; understanding these problems will allow you to better care for your pet and minimize future health care problems.



### **Rabies**

A common concern among owners of pet rodents is the possibility of contracting rabies if bitten by their pets. While any mammal is capable of contracting and transmitting rabies, the likelihood of this happening with a pet rodent is almost non-existent. However, rodent bites can become easily infected, so it would be wise to contact your doctor if bitten by your pet.

### **Barbering**

Many rodents chew on the hair of their cage-mates. Separating the animals prevents the problem.

### **Foot Necrosis/Gangrene**

This problem is caused by fine fiber or thread nesting material (or bedding) commonly available in pet stores. The pets play with the material, the fine thread gets wrapped around a toe or foot or leg, and within hours the body part is swelling and turning red. This is similar to what happens when you wind a thread tightly around your own finger. If not caught immediately, the swelling progresses to death (necrosis) of the limb followed shortly by gangrene. Affected limbs are swollen and are various shades of red, purple, blue and black. In some animals, amputations might be curative. Often, the high cost of the surgery forces owners to choose euthanasia for these pets. To prevent this condition, **DO NOT USE** this fine bedding or nesting material. Shredded tissue works perfectly.

### **Vitamin C Deficiency (Scurvy)**

Unlike many pets, guinea pigs can't make their own Vitamin C. This means it must be provided to the pet. Even though guinea pig pellets are fortified with Vitamin C, owners should still supplement the pigs with Vitamin C in the water. This is because Vitamin C is an unstable vitamin and quickly disappears from the pellets. Vitamin C can be offered to the pets in the drinking water. Crush 200-1000 mg of Vitamin C tablets (available at pharmacies or health food

stores) and mix with 1 liter of water. This needs to be made fresh daily and offered in the sipper tube as the source of water. Offering fresh green vegetables also provides supplemented Vitamin C. Signs of Vitamin C deficiency (scurvy) include loss of appetite, swollen painful joints, reluctance to move, lack resistance to infection, and occasional bleeding from the gums. Since Vitamin C deficiency is so common, any sick guinea pig should be given a Vitamin C injection as part of its treatment.

### ***Hyperthermia***

All pet rodents, but especially guinea pigs are very susceptible to heat stroke from high ambient temperatures. As a rule, the temperature should be no higher than 80 degrees, and the cage should be well ventilated and the humidity kept below 70%. Signs of heat stroke include panting, slobbering, weakness, convulsions, and refusal to move. Treatment involves immediately cooling the pet with cool water baths or sprays, and then seeking prompt veterinary care. Ideally, the temperature should be monitored with an in-cage thermometer.

### ***Antibiotic Toxicities***

All pet rodents are sensitive to certain antibiotics. Several of these antibiotics can be fatal; this is true whether or not the antibiotics are given orally, by injection, or topically (on the skin). Some examples of toxic antibiotics include penicillin and related drugs, bacitracin, erythromycin, lincomycin, tylosin, and streptomycin.

Owners should NEVER use antibiotics in or on their pet rodents without first consulting a veterinarian with experience in pet rodent medicine.

### ***Sialodacryoadenitis ("Red Tears")***

Red tears, often seen in mice and rats, can be a result of a viral disease, mycoplasmosis, or as a sign of stress. Often it is hard to tell what is actually causing the problem. The condition appears as if blood is coming from the animal's eyes. In the viral infection, usually the salivary and tear glands are involved. Because rodents have porphyrins (pigments) in their tears, any discharge will be seen as red tears. Treatment is symptomatic and involves topical eye medication.

### ***Proliferative Ileitis ("Wet Tail")***

The most serious intestinal disease of hamsters, wet tail is caused by a *Campylobacter* bacterium. Usually, 3-6-week-old hamsters are affected and show signs of lethargy, loss of appetite, unkempt hair coat, watery (sometimes bloody) diarrhea, and a wet anal and tail area. This disease requires immediate treatment including fluid therapy, antibiotics, and hospitalization. Animals may die even with early, aggressive treatment.



### ***Fracture***

Fractures of the legs (broken legs) are very common and usually result from injuries sustained on exercise wheels.

Mild injuries may heal on their own; severe injuries require amputation of the leg or euthanasia. Only sole-bottom exercise wheels should be used in the cage.

### ***Staphylococcal dermatitis ("staph dermatitis")***

A Staphylococcal bacterial skin infection can occur on the muzzle and nose of gerbils. It is seen as areas of hair loss and moisture. Treatment involves antibiotics.

### **Muzzle Dermatitis**

This is similar to, and often difficult to differentiate from, the staphylococcal dermatitis previously mentioned. In addition to a staphylococcal infection, muzzle alopecia (hair loss) can result from a parasitic infection called mange, or from trauma, such as that which occurs from the gerbil constantly rubbing its snout on the feeders or the cage itself.

### **Seizures**

The gerbil is unique among rodents in that spontaneous, epileptic-type seizures can occur, often after handling the pet. Most gerbils do not require medication for the seizures.

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