



“Pocket Pets”

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What are Pocket Pets?

The term “pocket pets” refers to all small mammals kept as pets, particularly those in the rodent family. This includes Guinea pigs, chinchillas, hamsters, gerbils, rats and mice. Because these animals are closely related, their care is very similar with a few exceptions. This handout covers general care that is applicable to all species, as well as facts and recommendations that are unique to each individual species.

Basic Pocket Pet Facts

Pocket pets are smaller than most other pets, such as dogs and cats, and usually fit easily into the palm of your hand. Although they are small, they are typically playful and non-aggressive. Most species are nocturnal, which means they sleep during the day and are awake at night. However, many pets will adjust to a schedule of daytime activity if handled regularly. These animals are usually very active and agile. Special care must be taken when holding or handling them to prevent them from escaping from your hold and injuring themselves during the fall.

Below is some general information about different types of pocket pets.

	Guinea Pig	Chinchilla	Gerbil	Hamster	Mouse	Rat	Prairie Dog
Life Span	5-6 yr	10 yr	24-39 mo	18-36 mo	12-36 mo	26-40 mo	8-10 yr
Weight	700-1,200 gm	400-600 gm	46-131 gm	87-130 gm	20-63 gm	225-500 gm	70-2,300 gm
Maturity age	2-3 mo	8 mo	9-18 wk	6-8 wk	6 wk	4-5 wk	2-3 yr
Weaning age	21 days	6-8 wk	21-28 days	19-21 days	18-21 days	21 days	6-7 wk
Temperature (Fahrenheit)	99.0-103.1°	98.6-100.4°	100.6°	99-100°	99°	99-100°	95.7-102.3°

Guinea Pigs

Guinea pigs are calm, non-aggressive animals that rarely scratch or bite unless provoked. They are social creatures and respond well to human handling and interaction once they become accustomed to being handled. Guinea pigs differ from other pocket pets in several ways:

Vitamin C Requirement: Unlike other rodents, Guinea pigs do not make their own Vitamin C. It must be provided for them in their diet. This vitamin cannot be stored in the body and must be provided on a daily basis. We recommend using at least two of the three methods below for providing your Guinea pig with adequate Vitamin C:

- **Water Supplementation**—Vitamin C can be added to the drinking water (1 gram per liter).
 - Change the water daily because Vitamin C rapidly degrades.
 - Clean the water bottle with hot soapy water daily because Vitamin C in the water promotes bacterial growth.
 - Cover the water bottle with a sock or other covering because light promotes the breakdown of Vitamin C.

- Metal, hard water and heat also cause Vitamin C to deteriorate faster, so be aware if your Guinea pig's water is exposed to any of these.
- **Food Supplementation**—Guinea pig pelleted diets are supplemented with Vitamin C.
 - Be sure to use a pelleted diet specifically designed for Guinea pigs.
 - Open a fresh bag at least monthly because Vitamin C breaks down over time.
 - Avoid using food that has been stored for a long time on the shelf at the store or at home.
- **Extra Supplementation**—Other Vitamin C sources can also be used.
 - Provide one Guinea pig Vitamin C fortified treat per pig per day.
 - Provide a quarter of an orange per pig per day.
 - Provide your Guinea pig with kale, parsley, beet greens, chicory, spinach, red and green peppers, broccoli, tomatoes and/or kiwi, as these are other foods rich in Vitamin C.

Flat, Open Housing: Guinea pigs do not jump or climb like most other pocket pets. For this reason, Guinea pig housing should be wide and long rather than tall. Cage coverings are not necessary to keep the pig from escaping.

Precocious/Well-Developed Young: Unlike the young of most other rodent species, Guinea pig pups are born fully developed. Their eyes are open and their bodies are covered in hair. Within just a few days they are able to start eating crushed, moistened pellets, although they are not weaned to from their mother for three weeks.

Chinchillas

Chinchillas are quiet, shy and fast. They rarely bite and will readily accept human interaction if handled frequently and gently. In the wild, they live in very large social groups, and they tend to do better in captivity if they are housed with other chinchillas. Chinchillas differ from other pocket pets in several ways:

Dust Baths: Unlike other rodents, chinchillas must take daily dust baths to maintain their skin and coat health. About an inch of sanitized chinchilla dust should be offered daily in a small shallow dishpan or other such container. The dust bath should be removed from the cage when not in use to prevent contamination.

Fur Slip: A chinchilla may shed its hair and top layer of skin when frightened to aid in its escape. This will result in a bald spot. To avoid such hair loss, it is important not to grasp its hair and to hold the chinchilla gently but firmly.

Gerbils

Gerbils are friendly odorless rodents that are easy to handle and that rarely bite. Due to their small size and quick, agile nature, they do not make good pets for children under 10 years old. Gerbils rarely fight with each other if raised together, but may fight if new adults are introduced. A few unique features of the species are noted below:

Ventral Marking Gland: Gerbils have a hairless orange-tan area on their abdomen that produces a musk-scented oil used to mark their territory.

Skin Slip: If gerbils are grabbed by any part of the tail except the base, the skin can slip off. This protects the gerbil from predators, but is a common problem when pet gerbils are not handled properly. Avoid grabbing the gerbil by its tail.

Dust Baths: Like chinchillas, gerbils benefit from occasional dust baths to maintain their skin and coat health. About a half inch of sanitized dust should be offered in a small shallow dishpan or other such container. The dust bath should be removed from the cage when not in use to prevent fecal contamination.

Hamsters

Hamsters are the least hardy of the pocket pets and are very susceptible to stress-related diseases. They can be quite feisty and may bite when startled, particularly when suddenly awakened. Because of this and because of their small body size, they do not tend to make good pets for young children. Hamsters should never be housed together as they will frequently fight with each other, sometimes to the point of death. Below are the traits that are unique to hamsters:

Cheek Pouches: Hamsters have pouches inside each cheek that allow them to eat rapidly and store food for later. Cheek pouches can become impacted if food stuffs get stuck, or in some cases, they may become everted (turned inside out). If your hamster is not eating well or seems to have difficulty eating, or if the cheeks seem to be constantly full, it is a good idea to have him or her examined.

Scent Glands: Hamsters have scent glands on both sides. The skin over these glands is dark and the hair is coarse. They are more prominent in males than females.

Cannibalism: Hamsters sometimes eat their young, particularly if disturbed during the first five days after giving birth. Food and water should be made readily accessible, but cleaning the cage or touching the young should be avoided during this time period. Males should never be housed with the mother and her litter, as they frequently will cannibalize the pups.

Mice

Mice, particularly the males, have a pungent musky odor. Due to their small size and quick nature they can be difficult to handle (especially for young children), although they rarely bite unless provoked. While females usually get along well with each other, male mice often fight and should not be housed together.

Tumors: Mice are very prone to developing tumors, particularly breast tumors. These can develop very rapidly and occur even in young animals. It is important to check your mouse carefully several times a week for any lumps or bumps. Any new lumps or bumps should be examined by a veterinarian as soon as possible. Early tumor identification and removal provides the best chance for a complete cure.

Rats

Rats are hardy when young, but can develop a wide range of health problems as they get older. Rats are typically calm and don't tend to bite. They also are large enough to be easily handled by children. Both males and females get along well and may be housed together.

Training: Rats are the most intelligent and the most easily trained of all the pocket pets. By providing attention and food rewards, rats can be trained to navigate mazes and perform a variety of “tricks.”

Tumors: Rats, like mice, are very prone to developing tumors, particularly breast tumors. These can develop very rapidly and occur even in young animals. It is important to check your rat carefully several times a week for any lumps or bumps. Any new lumps or bumps should be examined by a veterinarian as soon as possible. Early tumor identification and removal provides the best chance for a complete cure.

Prairie Dogs

The sale of prairie dogs was banned in the U.S. in 2003, due to the outbreak of monkey pox in prairie dogs. Because of this and because prairie dogs can have fleas that carry the plague, they are not generally recommended as pets. If you are considering a prairie dog as a pet, it is important to get it from a reputable source that will guarantee that the animal is free of disease and parasites.

Aggression: Prairie dogs have very sharp nails and can inflict deep, painful bites. Even animals that have been well tamed can become aggressive when hurt or frightened. Children and strangers should not be allowed to handle these pets, and anyone who does handle these animals should take appropriate precautions.

Burrowing: Prairie dogs are burrowing creatures in the wild. For this reason, they will commonly burrow in the bedding and may push bedding material out of the cage in the process.

Other Pocket Pets

While the animals discussed above are the most common rodents kept as pets, there are other small mammals in this group. Degus, squirrels, chipmunks and other rodents are sometimes kept as pets. If you have a more unusual exotic pet, it is very important to find out as much as you can about the dietary requirements, housing needs and health issues that are unique to your pet’s species. Our doctors will be happy to answer your questions regarding these animals.

Housing and Bedding

Housing

Because your pet will spend most of his or her life in the aquarium or cage, it is important to provide as much space as possible. All of the rodents except Guinea pigs do best in multilevel housing with shelves or climbing tubes to allow your pet to make full use of the vertical space.

Plastic or glass enclosures are best, as they are easily cleaned and disinfected; however, it is important to have a screened top or front to ensure adequate ventilation. Rodent urine is high in ammonia. Without proper ventilation the ammonia fumes will accumulate, even with frequent cage cleanings. This can lead to respiratory problems and other problems in your pet.

Because these small pets are agile and can fit through very small openings, it is very important to completely secure the cage (except with Guinea pigs). Be sure that the top (or other closure) fits snugly and latches securely. Even if it doesn't seem possible for your pet to reach the cage opening, there is a high risk of escape if the cage is not securely fastened.

Cage Furniture

Hide Box: The most important item of cage furniture is a hide box. These come in many shapes, sizes and designs. The important thing is that your pet should not be able to see out or be seen when in the hide box. This significantly decreases stress by allowing your pet to hide from things that frighten it.

Exercise Wheel: Many small rodents including hamsters, gerbils and mice will use an exercise wheel if available. This provides both exercise and stimulation. Be sure to purchase a wheel that is the appropriate size for your pet. If the wheel is too large, your pet's foot may get caught in the bars. If it is too small, your pet will not be able to use it properly. Exercise balls are an out-of-cage alternative, but they should only be used with adult supervision.

Tubes, Tunnels and Toys: A number of tubes and tunnels are available to purchase. Be sure to choose ones that are easy to clean and disinfect. Paper towel rolls and wrapping paper rolls also make good cage furniture. It is fine for your pet to chew up and shred the cardboard, as long as he or she is not swallowing it. Other types "toys" are also available to buy and can provide stimulation.

Bedding

It is good to put some kind of bedding on the floor of your pocket pet's cage. They can burrow into it and make a "nest" to provide warmth. Many commercial types of bedding are available. The paper-based products are the best because they do not produce dust or aromatic oils. If using wood shavings as bedding, be sure to avoid cedar shavings, as they have been shown to lead to respiratory problems. Pine shavings are most commonly used, but aspen and oak shavings are also available.

Be sure to change the shavings frequently to prevent ammonia buildup and mold growth. Because low-dust bedding is recommended it is important to provide chinchillas with dust baths. Some gerbils may also benefit from this.

Be sure all bedding material is stored in durable sealed containers inside the house (not in the garage or shed). Bedding material that is improperly stored may become contaminated with parasites from wild rodents.

Diet and Nutrition

Pelleted Diet

Pelleted diets are available to buy for each animal species. While nutritional requirements are similar, there are differences in required protein and fat content and vitamin needs. For this reason it is recommended that you choose a diet specifically formulated for your animal species. If your local pet store does not carry such food, commercial diet foods can be purchased off of the Internet. The following are sites from reputable companies with a good rodent diet selection:

- www.oxbowhay.com
- www.mazuri.com

The doctors at Clermont Animal Hospital, Inc. recommend using a uniform pelleted diet as the primary food source for your pet. “Gourmet” mixtures containing seeds, corn and other ingredients are not as good for your pet. This is because rodents tend to eat the more tasty seeds and other calorie-dense components while avoiding the nutritious pellets. This can lead to obesity, calcium deficiency, stomach problems and/or malnutrition. It is far better to feed a plain pelleted diet and offer very small quantities of seed, corn, grains and cereals as an occasional treat.

It is best to buy pelleted diets in small quantities in order to avoid prolonged storage. Some of the vitamins, including the Vitamin C in Guinea pig pellets, will degrade over time. Open a new package of pellets at least monthly.

Hay

Guinea pigs, chinchillas and prairie dogs need a continuous supply of fresh hay. This provides the high fiber needed in these species. This is not a required part of the diet of the smaller rodents.

Timothy hay and mixed grass hay are the best types to feed your pet. Alfalfa hay is too high in calcium and is not recommended for routine, long-term feeding. Hay is available packaged in the small animal section of most local pet stores. A cheaper alternative is to buy it directly from a local farmer. Be sure to store the hay in an airtight container away from any moisture.

Fresh Fruits and Vegetables

In addition to hay, Guinea pigs, chinchillas and prairie dogs need fresh vegetables to maintain a balanced diet. While these are not necessary for the smaller rodents, they can be used as an occasional treat and to provide some variety in the diet. Dark leafy vegetables such as kale, parsley, beet greens, chicory, spinach and romaine lettuce are the most important. Tomatoes, bell peppers (all colors) and other brightly-colored vegetables also provide important vitamins and minerals.

In general, fruits are too calorie-dense for your pet. With the exception of oranges (used for Vitamin C in Guinea pigs), fruits should only be used in small quantities as an occasional treat. Apples, oranges, grapes and kiwi are appetizing to most pocket pets. If diarrhea occurs following these tasty snacks, however, they should not be used.

Many rodents are reluctant to try new foods. It is important to make any diet changes slowly, adding only one new food at a time. Offer the new food at the time of day that your pet seems the hungriest (this will vary with both individuals and species). Do not be surprised if your pet totally ignores the new food. It is also important to watch for diarrhea following the introduction of new fruits or vegetables. If this occurs, do not feed that particular food item in the future.

Medical Care

Annual Examinations

Pocket pets do not require vaccinations like dogs or cats; however, annual veterinary exams are recommended to ensure the continued health of your pet. At these visits, our doctors will discuss home care and examine your pet thoroughly for any signs of disease, illness or tumors. They may also perform an oral exam to check your pet's teeth.

External Parasites

Lice and mites are a common problem in rodents. The most common sign associated with these problems is itching. Other signs include hair loss, crusty skin, open sores on the skin or parasites that are visible (particularly around the face). These parasites can be spread when new animals are introduced to the household or when bedding is contaminated by parasites from wild animals (mice, squirrels, chipmunks, etc.) To decrease the risk of exposure for your pets, have all new animals checked for these parasites before bringing them into your house. It is also important to store bedding in sturdy, well sealed containers away from rodents and wildlife. Bedding stored in a garage, shed or barn may be more likely to become contaminated with parasites.

Lumps and Bumps

It is important to check your pet regularly (at least once a week) for any lumps or bumps. Many rodent species are prone to developing tumors. Abscesses (pockets of pus) are also common, especially when several animals are housed together. These are usually a result of fighting or other injuries. Any time a new lump is noticed, it should be examined by one of our doctors. Early treatment provides the best chance for correcting the problem.

Respiratory Problems

Respiratory problems including pneumonia and upper respiratory infections are common in these pets. Sneezing, eye discharge, a "gurgling" sound when breathing and decreased appetite are all common signs of respiratory problems. If any of these signs are ever noted, please call our office for an appointment as soon as possible. Even a mild respiratory infection can progress very quickly to pneumonia and even death.

Dental Problems

Cause: Because rodents have teeth that grow continually, tooth overgrowth is a very common problem in these pets. In most cases this occurs because the teeth are not in proper alignment and do not wear evenly. In other cases it occurs because your pet is not chewing on enough rough materials to wear down the teeth. As the teeth overgrow, sharp points develop. These points can cut into the tongue creating ulcers or sores. In severe cases the bottom teeth can completely entrap the tongue or can grow through the roof of the mouth. It is important to watch for signs of these conditions so they can be prevented or treated.

Signs: The most common sign associated with dental problems is a **decreased appetite**. In some cases, rodents will continue to eat roughage such as hay or fresh vegetables while ignoring their pelleted diet. In other cases, they will stop eating all together. Other signs of problems include excessive drooling or a wet chin (especially in chinchillas), pawing at or rubbing the mouth, or teeth grinding.

In a small number of cases, the incisors (the teeth visible in the front of the mouth) will appear overly long. However, it is important to understand that it is the **back teeth**, not the front incisors that create

the problem. It is impossible for you to see these teeth without an oral speculum (the special tool we use for oral exams). Just because you don't see overgrowth of the front teeth does not mean that the back teeth are normal.

Treatment

Syringe Feeding: If you suspect that your pet has dental problems, the most important thing is to keep your pet eating until you can get him or her into our hospital. Because rodents rely on bacteria in their gut for digestion, they need to eat almost constantly to feed the bacteria. If your pet goes for more than 24 hours without eating, drastic changes can result in the digestive system.

If your pet is not eating at all, Clermont Animal Hospital, Inc. doctors recommend feeding him or her through a syringe (without a needle) or an eyedropper. We recommend using Herbivore Critical Care Formula® (available through the Clermont Animal Hospital, Inc.). We can also provide a syringe and give you feeding tips. If this is impossible, syringe feeding vegetable baby food will work in a pinch.

Trimming and Filing: If you suspect dental problems, it is important that one of our doctors see your pet as soon as possible. We will examine your pet's teeth using an oral speculum. If tooth overgrowth is confirmed, we will need to anesthetize your pet in order to trim and file the overgrown teeth. This is an outpatient procedure, but your pet will need to stay with us for the day so we can make sure he or she recovers fully from anesthesia. While only a light anesthetic is necessary, there is always a slight risk of death or other anesthetic complications. We monitor our patients very closely before, during, and after anesthesia to minimize this risk.

Preventing Problems

Rodents need firm substances to chew on to help ensure their teeth wear down at a proper rate. Hard pellets, wood blocks, porous stones (such as pumice) and young tree branches are good for your rodent to gnaw. When selecting tree branches, be sure to choose elm, ash, maple, birch, apple, pear or peach. Branches from other trees such as cedar, plum and cherry are poisonous to your pet.

In addition to providing things for your pet to chew, routine dental exams are important. This allows us to catch overgrowth early, before it turns into a painful problem for your pet.

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