

# Small Exotic Companion Mammal Wellness Management and Environmental Enrichment



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## KEYWORDS

- Wellness • Preventative medicine • Environmental enrichment • Education
- Exotic mammal

## KEY POINTS

- Preventative veterinary medical care is an important part of keeping exotic companion mammals healthy.
- Veterinarians should encourage annual or biannual wellness visits for all pets.
- Environmental enrichment is necessary for a pet's psychological health and well-being.
- Clients must be educated on proper husbandry, diet, and enrichment for mental stimulation to decrease the likelihood of medical problems of small exotic mammals.

## INTRODUCTION

Preventative veterinary medicine is defined as the science aimed at preventing disease in captive animals. It can also be simply defined as doing all one can to decrease the likelihood of developing medical conditions that could have been otherwise avoided. All too often the concepts of environmental enrichment, socialization, and exercise for small exotic pet mammals are ignored as many of these pets, such as guinea pigs, ferrets, hamsters, chinchillas, and rats, will live most of their lives in cages or tanks with little regard given to their mental and physical stimulation. Without education on wellness care, inappropriate diets and poor husbandry practices lead to animals becoming obese, lazy, and less likely to interact and provide pleasure as pets. Constant confinement without enrichment will lead to stress as well as certain otherwise avoidable behavioral and health problems. Veterinarians treating small exotic mammals should not only be familiar with the species' native habitats, lifestyles, and social interactions but also how to educate clients to ensure these unique pets

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receive proper care during veterinary visits. It is a misconception that these animals are maintenance free because they do not need to be walked or mentally and physically enriched. Exotic pets living in our homes are usually captive bred and depend entirely on their human caretakers for food and exercise and often in need of social time and companionship.

### **VETERINARY WELLNESS VISITS**

Any veterinarians treating small exotic mammals must encourage clients to schedule regular wellness visits. Many pet owners still think they should or choose to only seek veterinary care when the pet is sick or in need of medical intervention, which is a huge oversight. The new pet or postadoption/postpurchase visit is one of the most important as an opportunity to educate clients on everything they should be aware of to keep their pet healthy. Suggestions of diet, training, and general care as well as reliable Web sites and hospital-prepared care sheets and handouts can be provided. The wellness visit is a chance to discuss new diets or current research, monitor the pet's weight, and perform routine blood tests, fecal testing when appropriate, and radiographs for earlier diagnosis and prevention of disease. It also allows the veterinarian to guide pet owners to trusted Web sites and correct any misconceptions they may have read or heard about their pet. Discussion of spaying and neutering is also imperative during these visits and should not be overlooked. Mammary masses in rats, ovarian cystic disease in guinea pigs, and uterine adenocarcinomas in rabbits are just a few examples of preventable conditions that can be avoided with elective ovariectomy. All too often veterinarians are faced with the death of or having to perform euthanasia of a pet with an otherwise preventable disease, meaning one that might have been avoided if the client had elected more responsible veterinary care. Lastly, these visits are essential in establishing a relationship that allows the clients to call or e-mail with questions or concerns and use the veterinary hospital for services, such as nondoctor grooming and boarding where offered. Unfortunately, convincing pet stores and breeders to recommend postpurchase or postadoption veterinary visits remains a challenge.

### **SPECIES-SPECIFIC VETERINARY RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Rabbits, especially from pet stores or breeders, should have a fecal ova/parasite check for coccidia and treated accordingly. There are no currently approved vaccinations for rabbits in the United States at this time.
- Guinea pigs and rats should be evaluated for pediculosis as lice are commonly seen. Checking for the presence of nits (louse eggs) is also necessary and treated accordingly.
- Ferrets need vaccinations for rabies and distemper virus according to both local and state law and veterinarian recommendations for need. Currently, there is no approved distemper vaccination available for ferrets.
- Chinchillas should be tested for giardia infection and treated accordingly. Also, fur loss or signs of possible dermatophytosis should be assessed.
- All small mammals, but rabbits and chinchillas particularly, should have a full oral examination to evaluate for dental disease, such as malocclusion or other congenital anomalies.
- Elective castration of male rabbits will markedly decrease the likelihood of urine scent marking and humping behaviors in males and dominance behaviors of female rabbits. Spaying and neutering are important for some pets' ability to cohabitate.

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