



Care Of Exotic Pets

By: **Dr. LaNita Flanary**
Flanary Veterinary Clinic

First we need to define exotic pets – any pet not included in the canine or feline family. Most common examples are hamsters and rabbits. Today with the internet just a click away, exotic pets are becoming more available and common. If you have owned a dog or cat for years, you may think you are ready for the challenge of an exotic pet or while standing in front of the cute little furry creatures, a child has cajoled you into purchasing that hamster. The care of an exotic pet is very different in many ways. In this article



we will address our five most popular furry exotics. Our goal is to enlighten you on the basic housing needs; daily care and feeding of your new pet and make your transition from pet owner to exotic pet owner easier.

The top five furry exotics are the hamster, guinea pig, ferret, chinchilla, and rabbit. All five have similar needs in cages. This is the most important purchase and decision you will make other than what type of exotic. The minimum size cage for a single animal is three feet by three feet and at least two feet in height. That may sound large, but remember the exotic pet is going to spend a lot



Chinchilla

of time in that cage. All of these exotics must be kept inside – rabbits thrive better and make better pets if kept indoors but can be kept outside. These cages can be of wire mesh with hamsters being the only type that can be kept in aquariums. A solid floor is best for all. Wire floor for guinea pigs and rabbits is allowed if part of the cage has a solid floor. These cages must be cleaned and bedding changed twice weekly.

Two other issues that are common to all of these types of exotics are temperature and play time. Keeping a constant temperature is important in the health and well being of your exotic pet. Most of them thrive in a range of 72 to 78 degrees. Rabbits and chinchillas do best if they are kept in the least humid area of the house. Humidity can cause various respiratory infections. To truly enjoy your exotic, you should schedule playtime. But prior to releasing any of these pets, you must pet-proof your home. All of these exotics love to explore and chew on things such as electrical cords and remote controls. Hamsters are an exception to being allowed to run free in the home. There are special balls you can buy at your local pet store to exercise your hamsters.

For actual care and feeding we must be more specific about each exotic, so we will start with chinchillas. Their cage

should be lined with litter or bedding, such as pine or aspen. They should have a house to hide in and a spoke-free exercise wheel. They are very active and need a variety of toys and even the television left on to keep them stimulated to prevent boredom. Chinchillas should be fed a chinchilla pellet and high-fiber hay, such as timothy. They also like treats such as dried fruit and seeds, but only sparingly. Chinchillas should not get wet, but they will need a weekly dust bath with a special dust that can easily be purchased at your local pet store.

Ferrets need a litter box, bedding, food and water dispensers in their cages. Ferrets need a high-fat, low fiber meat-based diet. Dry ferret food is a great option. It is common for ferrets to eat foreign bodies if you have not ferret-proofed your home. This commonly leads to GI obstructions. Ferrets are great clowns and love to play, so a safe option for them is plastic tubes. Ferrets need their nails trimmed every two to three weeks to prevent overgrowth. They can be bathed every few months with a ferret shampoo. Ferrets do require annual veterinary visits for exams and vaccinations. Vaccinations include a rabies vaccine and a ferret distemper vaccine. Ferrets can develop many health problems as they

age, so veterinary care is essential. With proper care and nutrition your ferret can live up to six to ten years.

Guinea pigs are social animals and are usually happier to have another guinea pig as a companion. We recommend same-sex pairs. They need a shelter in their cage. A good diet for guinea pigs includes good quality hay, root vegetables, leafy greens and pellets. They need the fiber (hay) in their diet to wear down their teeth, since they are predisposed to overgrowth. It is essential for guinea pigs to have vitamin C, so it must be included in their diet, the best being from parsley, broccoli, cabbage, and cauliflower. Poor husbandry can bring on many health problems with respiratory and fungal irritation of the skin at the top of the list. Regular veterinary checkups are a great idea even though guinea pigs do not require any vaccinations. They do require having their nails trimmed regularly. With the right food and good husbandry, guinea pigs can live five to nine years.



There are several different types of hamsters but they all require the same basic care. They need a place to hide and a wheel for entertainment. There are some cute plastic cages that connect with tubes that provide both safe shelters and entertainment. Paper tissues or hamster-safe bedding will provide a cozy nesting material. Hamsters are hoarders and have pouches inside their mouths that go down each side of their faces to their necks. They will fill each of these pouches full of food and empty them into their nesting box or a corner of their cage. They should be fed hamster pellets and can also eat fresh fruits and vegetables as treats. Hamsters sleep during the day and are very active at night. So chose the cage location carefully and

avoid the bedroom of a light sleeper. A hamster's teeth continue to grow throughout its lifetime and you will need to provide a variety of chewable objects in the cage. Pet stores carry chew sticks and blocks that hamsters will love to gnaw. No vaccinations are required for hamsters, but regular veterinary check ups are required. Diarrhea is a major problem with hamsters and because of their small size, can it become serious quickly. Notify your veterinarian immediately of loose stools.

Rabbits are one of the most common exotics. They are relatively easy to care for either indoors or outdoors. But you will receive the greatest amount of joy from your rabbit if kept indoors. Rabbits are easily trained to a litter box and they are clean in nature. They should be fed a good quality rabbit pellet offered daily in limited quantity. An uncontrolled feeding can lead to obesity, heart and liver disease, chronic diarrhea, and kid-



ney disease. Loose, long strands of hay are preferred to promote healthy digestion. Rabbits may be fed fresh limited amounts of vegetables and greens daily. Treats such as strawberries, pineapple chunks, apples, pears, melon slices, and banana slices can be given in small amounts. Your veterinarian can make recommendations on amounts for specific breeds. Currently there are no vaccinations for rabbits. But as with all pets, an annual veterinary visit is recommended.

In summary, any exotic pet you choose needs the proper food, clean, fresh water daily, adequate and safe housing and regular check ups with your veterinarian. With a little research before making the leap into exotic animals, you can ensure that your family and your new exotic pet will have many quality years together. +