

## Routine health care

We are all familiar with the phrase "A healthy pet is a happy pet" - but there is probably also something to be said for keeping your pet happy in order to maintain its health. If you know your pet you will probably quickly recognise the signs that suggest it is not well.

### What are the signs of good health?

A healthy animal will have bright eyes, clean ears, eyes and nose and be interested in what is going on around it. The amount of food an animal eats varies a lot between individuals - if your pet's weight remains constant then they are eating the right amount of food. You should be concerned if your pet's appetite or water consumption suddenly changes, or your pet suddenly starts to gain or lose weight. When in good condition a pet's coat should be shiny, soft and free of parasites.

### How do I keep my pet in good health?

To keep your pet in good condition it must be fed a healthy diet and allowed regular exercise. Mental stimulation in the form of an interesting environment and opportunities to play are also important. The closer your pet's diet and environment is compared to how it would eat and live in the wild, the healthier and happier it will be.

### What is a healthy diet?

A healthy diet is a balanced diet containing all the nutrients your pet requires. Not all small pets requirements are the same. For example, mice, gerbils, hamsters and rats are omnivores, which means that, like us, they naturally eat mainly vegetable matter, but to keep in good health require some food of animal origin as well, eg cheese, insects, meat, egg, etc. Guinea pigs, rabbits and chinchillas, however, are herbivores, which means they only eat vegetable matter, eg grass, hay, fresh fruit and vegetables.

### How can I maintain my pet's health?

There are a number of measures that can help prevent your pet developing diseases. You should discuss the special needs of your pet with your vet.

#### Neutering

It is a sad truth that the number of pets born every year is far greater than the number of good homes that can be found for them. As a result, thousands of healthy animals are destroyed and many unwanted animals are abandoned and left to fend for themselves. Having your pet neutered will help to reduce the number of unwanted animals and can also help to safeguard your pet's health and welfare. Neutering is a common procedure in rabbits; guinea pigs and chinchillas can also be neutered. It is less common to have other small pets like rats and mice neutered and most people tend to keep them in groups where all animals are the same sex.

#### Vaccinations

Most small pets do not require vaccinations against disease. However, rabbits are susceptible to two fatal diseases, Myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD) for which a safe and effective vaccination is available. Make sure your rabbit is regularly vaccinated against these diseases if you want them to stay fit and healthy.

#### Dental care

All rodents and rabbits have front teeth that grow continuously, so a high fibre diet is essential to allow the teeth to wear down naturally. Fresh grass or hay is a good source of fibre and should form the majority of the rabbit's diet. You could also provide something for your pet to gnaw on, for example a wood or hide chew toy. This will help to keep your pet's teeth in good condition and prevent dental problems. If you notice that your pet's teeth are growing too long, your vet will be able to trim or file them down with a dental drill.

### How do I know if my pet is unwell?

If your pet has a poor coat condition, dull eyes, dirty ears, eyes or nose it may indicate that they are

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unwell. Changes in behaviour (a normally happy and affectionate pet may become grumpy and avoid human contact, preferring to hide away by itself), altered appetite or water consumption should also alert you to the possibility that there may be a problem with your pet. Most animals recover from illness in 24-48 hours - if your pet does not seem to be improving in this time or is getting worse then you should contact your vet.

**If you want any other information on health issues concerning your small animal please contact Unicorn Vets on 023 8034 3434 and we will be happy to advise you.**