

Rabbits and Rodents as Pets

Bonnard Moseley*
Department of Veterinary Medicine
College of Veterinary Medicine

Rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters, gerbils and even rats and mice make excellent pets if properly handled, fed and caged. They require little space and food and will become tame if handled gently. However, these pets require conscientious and continuing care if they are to remain healthy and active. This guide describes the more important aspects of small animal care.

Sources of Information

Books and pamphlets on the care and raising of small pets are readily available in pet stores, libraries and from feed companies (Ralston-Purina, Carnation-Albers and the Missouri Farmers Association, for example). Most of these short and practical publications are either free or low cost and contain fairly complete information about raising rabbits and rodents.

Markets for Small Animals

While pet stores, meat outlets and research facilities do occasionally purchase rabbits or rodents from small suppliers, most animals sold in retail outlets or used in research come from large distributors or companies. No one should invest large sums of money in a breeding or commercial operation until a market has been determined and partially established.

The sale of rabbit meat or animals for research or pets may come under federal animal welfare or wholesale meat laws administered by the United States Department of Agriculture. Inquiries should be directed to the USDA, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Veterinary Services, 210 Walnut Street, Room 877, Des Moines, Iowa 50309.

Vaccinations

Rabbits and small rodents housed in or around a home are not vaccinated routinely for any disease, including rabies. Rabies, although a dreaded and serious disease, is extremely rare in small pet animals, and almost all reported cases are discounted as concern following a bite.

A physician, however, should make the final decision on procedures following an animal bite. A veterinarian should be consulted about disease prevention or treatment of exotic pets.

Feeding and Watering

Provide rabbits and small rodents with fresh, clean water from a sipper tube water bottle or a gravity-fed watering



Figure 1. Wire rabbit cage is equipped with water bottle and hopper feeder.

system. Bottles with sipper tubes can be purchased from pet or farm supply stores. Animals should be fed a fresh, wholesome, pelleted or seed combination feed specifically recommended for the species of the pet involved.

Feeding the proper feed is important for rabbits and guinea pigs. Guinea pigs must have vitamin C in their diet, or they will die of scurvy within a few months. Although guinea pig feeds contain vitamin C, kale and cabbage have large quantities of this vitamin. Lettuce and carrots are not good sources.

Feed for small rodents should contain no less than 16 percent crude protein (CP). Many pet feeds sold in pet shops are unacceptable because of low protein content.

Dietary supplementation with salt, fruit, table scraps or field crops is not recommended as a routine practice. Purchase a quality, pelleted feed and do not vary the diet. The feed should be supplied from hopper feeders attached to the side of the crate. The use of crocks or pans as feeders or watertroughs promotes the spread of disease.

Housing and Bedding

Cages should be secure from escape and predators, provide protection from cold, wind, damp and direct sun and be easily cleaned. Of the small pets, only rabbits can be

*John Harkness, D.V.M. and John D. Rhoades, D.V.M. contributed to the publication of this guide.



Figure 2. This shows proper restraint for a gerbil.

housed outdoors. Soft bedding, such as wood chips or paper, is needed for small rodents to hide and nest. Rabbits should be housed on wire floors. Wood is a poor material for animal houses because it is susceptible to chewing and rot. If wood is used, it should be painted and not used on cage floors.

Restraint

Rabbits and guinea pigs should be lifted with two hands, one on the loose neck skin and the other under the heavy rear quarters. These animals, if improperly held, may struggle and break their backs. Small rodents can be picked up in cupped hand or by a grip over the back. If a rodent's tail is grasped beyond the point of attachment, the tail skin may slip off. Rodents do not grow new tails.

Hamsters are the most likely of the small pets to bite, but even they respond to gentle and frequent handling. Rabbits often scratch with their powerful rear limbs and may bite if startled or if they mistake your finger for food.

Breeding

Gerbils, mice, rats and guinea pigs are mated by housing a male with one or more females together in a cage. Hamster and rabbit males and females often fight and should be paired only when mating is desired. Rabbits may be bred almost anytime, but hamsters will mate only during one evening every four days. Nests, mothers and young should not be disturbed for three days before and three days after birth, or the mother may become frightened and kill the young. Adult male animals should not be housed together because of fighting.

Table 1. Breeding Data

	Age to breed	Gestation	Lifespan
Rabbit	5-9 mos	29-35 days	6-12 yrs
Guinea pig	4-5 mos	58-68 days	4-7 yrs
Hamster	6-8 wks	15-18 days	1-2 yrs
Gerbil	10-12 wks	24-26 days	3-4 yrs
Mouse	7-9 wks	19-21 days	2-3 yrs
Rat	7-9 wks	19-21 days	3-4 yrs

Disease Prevention

Because disease is difficult to treat in rabbits and rodents and is usually serious, take proper steps to prevent illness. Clean cages thoroughly every few weeks, especially when young or new arrivals are introduced. Water animals from



Figure 3. This is the proper way to lift a rabbit.

sipper tubes and feed them from hoppers. Food should be fresh and suitable for the animal, and it should contain adequate protein. Always provide water. The suggestion that gerbils and hamsters don't need water is a myth.

A common cause of death in young rodents is their inability to reach or operate the watering device or to gnaw hard seeds or pellets. Diets should not be changed often or diarrhea may develop. Remember, small rodents age rapidly and may be "old" in one to three years. Proper diet and housing will prolong their lives.

Diseases

Rabbits and rodents are susceptible to several diseases, and a good pet owner should be aware of changes in an animal's behavior or appearance. Pneumonia is common in rats, rabbits and guinea pigs. Diarrhea and skin diseases occur frequently in all species. A veterinarian should be consulted when disease problems arise.

Danger to Man

Pet rabbits and rodents rarely have diseases transmissible to man. The usual precautions of avoiding bites and scratches and treating or isolating sick animals should be observed.

Summary

Rabbits and small rodents make good pets, but they must be properly fed, handled and housed. Cages should protect the animals and be easily cleaned. Experimenting with food "treats" and bargain diets is poor practice. Fighting among animals can be reduced by providing individual caging, ample space, hiding places and good feed and by disturbing the nest as little as possible.