Colorado State University
VETERINARY TEACHING HOSPITAL

The Importance of Wellness Examinations for Your Exotic Pet

Birds, reptiles, and small pet mammals, such as ferrets, rabbits, guinea pigs, chinchillas, rodents, hedgehogs, and sugar gliders have the ability to hide their illnesses (therefore, appear healthy) until they become so sick and weak that they appear to have become suddenly ill when in fact they may have been ill for some time. In such cases, the disease process has become very serious. Therefore, routine wellness examinations are important in these animals in an attempt to detect these illnesses before they become serious and life threatening. These animals often provide limited information from a physical examination alone. Therefore, laboratory testing of blood samples and radiographic (x-ray) evaluations often provide additional information need to assess the health of the animal.

Many of these exotic pets have specific nutritional or environmental requirements that many pet owners do not provide. They are unable to provide these needs either because they are simply unaware of what the requirements might be or are financially unable to provide what is needed. As a result these animals often suffer from the lack of proper care. As a whole, exotic pets are not like our pet dog and cat that are easily maintained in the home environment by feeding commercially prepared diets. Owners of exotic pets should learn about the natural history of their exotic pet and attempt to duplicate as close as possible the natural environment and diet. Exotic pets commonly kept in our society typically suffer from the lack of a proper understanding of their needs. The following is a list of examples of exotic pets commonly kept in our society that typically suffer from the lack of a proper understanding of their needs. Obviously, the list is much longer than those presented here.

PSITTACINE BIRDS

African Grey parrots (*Psittacus erithacus*), Amazon parrots (*Amazona* spp), Budgerigars (*Melopsittacus undulatus*), Cockatiels (*Nymphicus hollandicus*), Cockatoos (*Cacatua* spp), Eclectus parrots (*Eclectus roratus*), Lovebirds (*Agapornis* spp), and Macaws (*Ara* spp) are examples of common pet psittacine birds in North America. These birds come from a variety of habitats, but most are tropical species. Some are Old World species and others are New World species. Many of these birds are highly social animals. They may have specific nutritional and environmental requirements. With the limitations on importation of wild caught psittacine birds into North America, many of the outbreaks of infectious diseases associated with the housing of these birds in USDA supervised quarantine facilities have decreased. Today, most pet psittacine birds are domestically raised; however, they are genetically adapted for the native habitat of their ancestors. Psittacine pets frequently suffer from disorders that appear to be associated with the captive environment and diet. These disorders include feather picking and mutilation behavior, low blood calcium levels, vitamin A deficiency, foot infections, egg-binding and egg-related diseases, excessive egg production, overgrowth of beak and nails, obesity, diabetes mellitus, liver disease, cancer, heavy metal toxicity, and behavioral problems, such as aggression, feather destruction disorder, and screaming. The captive environment could contribute to chronic stress that predisposes some birds to bacterial or fungal infections. Birds also frequently suffer with problems related to their diet. Feather and skin disorders, overgrown nails and beaks, gastrointestinal disease, and reproductive disease are frequent illnesses of pet birds.

Pet birds of all ages benefit from annual examinations, much like young children. Birds, like most exotic pets, are masters at making themselves look healthy when in fact they are seriously ill. This is apparently a survival mechanism of their wild ancestors. If one appears healthy, then a predator is less likely to attack. Annual examinations are designed to pick up illnesses in birds that are faking being healthy. The annual examinations should include a compete blood cell count (CBC) and blood biochemistry profile along with the physical examination. Early detection of diseases, such as nutritional deficiencies, kidney, respiratory, and liver disease, and feather disorders are important to the successful treatment of these conditions. It is important that bird owners, especially first time bird owners, learn about the proper care of their pet. At the time of the annual

examination, a review of the bird's diet and environment will help the bird owner to provide a healthier life for his or her pet.

REPTILES

Reptiles, such as the common green iguana (*Iguana iguana*) and its closely related subspecies, *Iguana iguana rhinolopha,* are popular pet lizards in North America. The native habitats of these lizards are tropical rain forests. Generally, the relative humidity should be 85-95% and the temperature should range between 80°-90° F (27°-34° C) in the animals' captive environment to mimic that of their natural environment. Providing these lizards with an adequate captive environment becomes a challenge for many pet iguana owners, especially here in the semi-arid environment of the Front Range of Colorado. Also, these lizards can become quite large making it more of a challenge to provide them with an optimal environment. The natural diet of these lizards may vary slightly with age, but they are basically herbivores and primarily leaf eaters. They are also basking reptiles, which indicates that they benefit from exposure to unfiltered natural sunlight.

Captive green iguanas frequently suffer from disorders that are associated with improper husbandry practices. Nutritional problems are common disorders of pet green iguanas resulting in bone disease in juveniles and digestive and reproductive tract disorders in adults. Dysecdysis or abnormal skin shedding is a problem associated with an excessively dry environment. This could result in the loss of toes. Traumatic injuries and thermal burns are frequently associated with improper caging. Infections are often associated with conditions associated with a reptile being house outside its optimal temperature gradient.

Reptiles benefit from annual examinations because, like birds, they can often look healthy up to the point of death. Young reptiles (1-2 years of age) especially benefit from an annual examination that includes testing for fecal parasites. A review of the reptile's diet and environment may help the owner to provide the optimum care for their pet. Reptiles 3 years of age and older benefit from annual examinations that include a compete blood cell count (CBC) and blood biochemistry panel to detect nutritional, kidney, and reproductive disorders that are best treated early in the disease process.

SMALL MAMMALS

The following schedules of preventative and wellness exams are recommended for the screening for disease in young, middle-aged, and geriatric animals. In addition to detecting specific medical conditions of concern, these wellness exams will be important in the establishment of individual reference ranges that aid in the assessment of the patient's health.

Ferrets commonly develop tumors, especially those associated with the adrenal glands, the pancreas (insulinomas), the lymphoid tissue (lymphoma), and the skin (mast cell tumors and chordomas). Ferrets also frequently suffer from heart disease, hairballs, and dental disease. Our goal is to identify and treat these conditions before they cause a significant health problem. We also recommend vaccinating ferrets for canine distemper (a highly fatal infectious disease in ferrets) and rabies.

1-2 years of age: annual physical examination and vaccination.
3-5 years of age: annual examination and complete blood cell count and blood glucose evaluation.
5 years and beyond: biannual examinations that include complete blood cell count and full serum chemistry panel. Annual radiographs will be recommended to screen for cancer and heart disease.

Diseases of concern: Insulinoma, lymphoma and other neoplasias, adrenal disease, heart disease, dental disease.

Rabbits commonly develop problems with their teeth, heart, spine, gastrointestinal tract, and urinary tract. The can also develop tumors.

1-4 years of age: annual physical examination including dental examination
4 years and beyond: annual physical examination including dental examination, complete blood cell count, serum chemistry panel, and radiographs.

***Diseases of concern**:* Dental disease, heart disease, spondylosis, reproductive diseases (spaying of females is recommended to prevent uterine cancer), and urinary tract disease (kidney disease and bladder stones) in geriatric individuals.

Guinea pigs commonly suffer from problems with their teeth, gastrointestinal tract, urinary tract, and skin. Intact females often develop reproductive tract disorders.

1-3 years: annual examination including dental examination.
3 years and beyond: annual examination including dental examination, complete blood cell count, serum chemistry panel, and radiographs.

***Diseases of concern**:* Detection of dental disease, dietary disorders, and geriatric disease (such as kidney disease and bladder stones).

Chinchillas often develop similar problems as guinea pigs. The frequently suffer with dental disease, gastrointestinal tract disorders, and skin problems.

1-4 years: annual examination including dental examination
4-8 years: annual examination including dental examination, complete blood cell count and serum chemistries
8 years and beyond: annual examination including dental examination, complete blood cell count, serum chemistries and radiographs

***Diseases of concern**:* detection of geriatric disease and husbandry related conditions.

Hamsters/gerbils/mice/rats frequently have problems with teeth and gastrointestinal tract. They also commonly develop cancer of a variety of types.

All ages: annual examinations

***Diseases of concern**:* Detection of respiratory disease, dental disease, geriatric disease (tumors and kidney disease), and husbandry related conditions.