

When to Take Exotic Animals to the Vet

It is understood by most dog and cat owners when a trip to the vet is warranted. Lack of appetite, lethargy, vomiting, diarrhea, itching, and weight loss are examples of common triggers for us that something is wrong. But what about the less common members of our pet family? When should pet birds, rabbits, guinea pigs, ferrets, or reptiles visit the animal hospital?

Many exotic species kept as pets are considered “prey” species in their natural habitat. These animals will often hide illness much longer than domesticated dogs and cats. But why? In the wild, a prey animal that appears ill will often be the first to be isolated and targeted by predators. So as a defensive mechanism, many exotic species have evolved the ability to not appear sick, even when fighting an infection or dealing with disease. At some point, the energy used to “keep up appearances” is depleted and they show outwards signs of illness, or worse, are found dead. This means to us that we must be very aware of any physical changes and seek veterinary care as soon as illness is suspected.

BIRDS

- A healthy bird will be alert and attentive to the environment.
- Droppings should be consistent, and not have a strong odor. When a bird first becomes ill, often the first sign will be a change to the droppings. This could include diarrhea, increased urine (water part), change in color (red or dark black), change in size, or passage of undigested food.
- A “fluffed” appearance indicates illness, or if sits quietly with ruffled feathers, often at the bottom of the cage. These birds do not move a lot, and although can be distracted from this state, will often return quickly back. Such birds should be examined as soon as possible by a bird-experienced vet.
- Traumas from flight, animal attacks, or bleeding are also indications to seek attention immediately.
- Feather loss or destruction is a very common problem that has many influences, and should always be explored with a vet. Often such birds are not completely healthy, contributing to the feather picking behavior.

RABBITS/GUINEA PIGS

- These popular pets are similar to horses in their need for a high fiber diet.
- If any problem keeps them from eating hay for a day or two, then a series of digestive problems can occur. This is quickly life threatening, so it is important if few stools are suddenly produced or less food is eaten to seek vet attention.
- Other common signs of illness include sneezing or eye/nose discharge, itching or fur loss, and sudden weight loss.
- During the summer months it is very important to not allow them to overheat. They should be kept at temperatures around 75 or below, and always have access to fresh water.

FERRETS

- Since ferrets are predators in the wild, they tend to show clinical signs of illness relatively earlier than other exotics. However, most illnesses encountered are very serious and can require surgery or several days of hospitalization.
- Young ferrets are prone to human influenza, or swallowing odd objects, such as plastic or erasers.
- Older ferrets commonly develop tumors, often affecting different hormones, or cancers like lymphoma.
- Symptoms indicating illness include decreased appetite, vomiting, diarrhea, weakness or staggering, weight loss, or fur loss.
- Ferrets should be fed a diet that is very high in meat-based protein, with little to no carbohydrates. Like many pet exotics, they also can benefit from regular exposure to sunshine while supervised.

REPTILES

- Because there are so many different reptiles from all different countries and habitats, it is imperative to understand the appropriate humidity, temperature, substrate, UV light, and diet for the species you possess and follow it strictly.
- A sick reptile will often be less active, and not eat or defecate as much as usual. Nasal discharge, open mouth breathing, and changes to skin or scales are also indications for an exam. It is recommended that predator reptiles not be fed live prey to prevent bite wounds and trauma.