

SMALL RODENT HEALTH CARE

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Respiratory Disease in Rats

Respiratory infections caused by *Mycoplasma pulmonis*, *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, *Cornebacterium kutscheri*, *Sendai* virus, or any combinations of these are common in rats. These diseases may start out with upper respiratory signs, but often end up in a chronic pneumonia. Signs include sniffing, sneezing, labored breathing, squinting, red-brown tearing, and a

rough hair coat. If the inner ear becomes infected, a head tilts and neurological signs develop. The goal of therapy is to reduce the severity of clinical signs, but these infections should be considered permanent. The disease is highly contagious. It is extremely important to isolate any animal of unknown health status. A quarantine period of 4-6 weeks is highly recommended. Any

animal exhibiting even the slightest signs of respiratory disease should remain isolated.

Wet Tail in Hamsters

The most commonly encountered bacterial infection in hamsters is "wet tail". It is caused by a bacterium called *Lawsonia intracellularis*. Young hamsters are most commonly affected, but hamsters of all ages are susceptible. Chronic diarrhea is the primary

clinical sign seen with this disease. Other signs include matting of the fur around the tail, unkempt hair coat, hunched stance, loss of appetite, dehydration, weight loss, and irritability. Blood from the rectum and rectal prolapse may also be seen. Death may occur within 1-7 days after the onset of

watery diarrhea. Due to the severity of the disease, any hamster exhibiting these signs should be seen by a veterinarian immediately. Treatment includes antibiotics, fluid therapy, and nutritional support.

Rostral Dermatitis in Gerbils

Rostral dermatitis occurs in gerbils as a result of excessive secretions of the Harderian gland. The secretions irritate the skin and secondary infections sometimes occur. Gerbils develop hair loss and the nose and muzzle with open lesions and crusting. This condition is often attributed to abrasions from coarse bedding or rough surfaces in the cage, but the Harderian gland may also be involved. It spreads from being

localized nasal hair loss to involving the face, legs, and ventral body surfaces. If treated early in the course of the disease, the condition often resolves, but if not attended to early, the treatment is often unrewarding. Affected gerbils are treated with topical antibiotics and corticosteroids and changing to a less irritating bedding.



“Demodectic mange in hamsters is often associated with chronic, debilitating disease or other underlying problems”

Hair Loss in Hamsters

Hair loss can occur for a number of reasons in hamsters. An infestation with demodectic mites is one of the most common causes of patchy alopecia (hair loss) and scaling in hamsters. The mites cause dry scaly skin and subsequent hair loss,

especially over the back and rump. The disease is rarely a problem by itself.

Demodectic mange in hamsters is often associated with chronic, debilitating disease or other underlying problems. Treatment for the mites is often possible, but

there may be another problem, often more severe, underlying the mite infestation which must be addressed. Other conditions that may lead to hair loss include adrenal tumors, thyroid deficiency, and chronic renal disease.

Epilepsy in Gerbils

The gerbil has genetic tendency to develop epileptic seizures. The seizures may be initiated by fright, handling, or exposure to a new environment. The attacks can be mild (slight shaking) to very severe (violent convulsions and collapse). The convulsions do not appear to having long term effects. In some

instances, however, death may result following very severe seizures, but this is rare. Anticonvulsant therapy is not indicated and can cause more serious side effects than the seizures themselves. Frequent handling during the first few weeks of life and providing a stable environment with a complete, balanced diet can help

suppress the seizures in genetically predisposed gerbils.

Tumors in Rats and Mice

Rats and mice are very susceptible to developing tumors. Mammary tumors are the most common type of cancer in rats. The majority of these are benign fibroadenomas. These tumors can occur in both females and males. Since rats have widely distributed mammary tissue beneath the skin, it is not unusual to find these tumors behind the front legs, along the sides, in the flanks, as well as along the

underside of the body. Surgical removal is the treatment of choice. If not treated and surgically removed, these masses continue to enlarge, ulcerate, and become infected.

Unlike rats, most mammary tumors in mice are malignant and have a high rate of reoccurrence following surgical resection. Mice develop tumors in a wide variety of

tissues, both internal and external. Leukemia, cancer of the white blood cells, is also common in the mouse.

Tumors in Gerbils

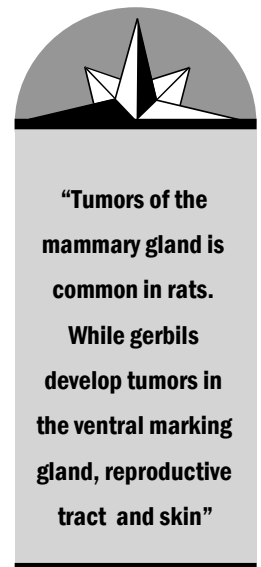
Gerbils have a high incidence of cancer after they reach about 2 years of age. Tumors in gerbils often involve the ventral marking gland, the reproductive tract, or the skin. Treatment is surgical removal.

Ovarian tumors are common in female gerbils. Signs include poor reproductive

performance and distended abdomen. These signs can be present with cystic ovaries as well.

The skin is the second most common site for tumors. Squamous cell carcinoma and melanomas are most frequently encountered.

The ventral marking gland is the third most common site of neoplasia. This is a hairless, oval, tan structure in the mid-abdominal area. The gland produces an orange-colored secretion for marking territory. The tumors are not usually malignant, but may have secondary bacterial infections.



Geriatric Diseases in Gerbils and Rats

Renal disease is common in older gerbils (2.5-4 years old) and rats. Signs include weight loss, loss of muscle mass, poor appetite, lethargy, and increases water consumption. Treatment is supportive care.

Pituitary tumors are also common in aging female rats. The pressure exerted by these tumors can cause a variety of neurological signs.

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Geriatric Diseases in Hamsters

Geriatric diseases predominate in hamster medicine. Amyloidosis, heart disease, and Cushings disease occur commonly in older hamsters, typically after the age of one year. Treatment consists of managing clinical signs since cures are not possible.

Amyloidosis is a condition where proteins produced by the body are deposited in various organs, primarily liver and kidneys. Kidney and liver failure often occurs as a result of this protein deposit. Many

other organs are also affected and the changes are irreversible. Signs of this condition include swollen abdomen, urinary problems, dehydration, poor appetite, and rough hair coat. Supportive care is the only treatment since this disease is eventually fatal.

Cushings disease is caused by excessive production of cortisol by the adrenal gland. Signs include increased drinking and urination, pendulous abdomen, hair loss, lethargy, muscle weakness,

obesity, and muscle loss. Again, treatment is supportive. Other diseases of older hamsters include liver and kidney disease, tumors, and dental disease.