

# Elburn Animal Hospital Newsletter

October, 2009

## Welcome

Fine feathered friends, tough turtles, fluffy bunnies and “slippery” snakes—we see all these “exotic” pets, and more! In this issue, learn about the wide variety of out-of-the-ordinary pets we see each day. We’ll discuss general husbandry, routine veterinary care, and some major differences between treating a cat or dog and treating an exotic animal. Any questions can be addressed to a member of our staff at (630) 365-9599, or you can contact us via email at [3lburn@sbcglobal.net](mailto:3lburn@sbcglobal.net).

## October: Exotic Pets

### What Is An Exotic Pet?

The easiest answer to this question is an exotic pet is one that is not often seen or not considered domesticated. Most birds, reptiles, and many small mammals fall into this category. Veterinarians take specific classes in school to learn how to treat exotic animals, and periodically take continuing education courses after they graduate. At Elburn Animal Hospital we see exotic pets ranging from tiny parrotlets to large macaws; little house geckos to Burmese pythons; mice to chinchillas; sugar gliders; ferrets; and all manner of rabbits. The only exotic pets we do not see are pot-bellied pigs (they are more appropriately treated by a livestock veterinarian) and monkeys (due to the zoonotic disease potential).

The group that comprises the “exotic” pets is easily the most diverse and challenging group to treat. Many have body systems that function differently than domesticated animals. Most are able to hide symptoms of illness until it becomes life-threatening, so a veterinarian must be highly familiar with each type of exotic pet, the illnesses commonly seen, and methods of treatment. This is also why we recommend regular exams.

### Husbandry Issues in Exotic Animals

The majority of illnesses (and a large number of injuries) in exotic pets is due to unsound husbandry practices. Sometimes not much is known about how to keep a particular animal in captivity. Other times there may be a lot of

information available, but it is not communicated to new owners when they purchase this animal. There is also much false or incomplete information about how to care for exotic pets found on the internet. At the first visit for each exotic pet to our hospital we give a packet of information explaining how to best take care of the pet from a veterinary standpoint.

**Housing** is one important piece that is often misunderstood. Different animals require different styles of housing. True chameleons, for example, require an enclosure that allows for high humidity but increased air movement.

We usually recommend a wire-mesh enclosure with a misting system to accommodate these needs. The humidity levels in the desert are higher than those



in the average American home in the winter! Rabbits, guinea pigs and chinchillas require lower temperatures. Chinchillas especially can suffer heat stroke at temperatures above 77F.

These animals should never be kept outdoors without appropriate housing.

The substrate, or bedding, used in the enclosure is also important. Often, pet-store employees suggest cedar or pine shavings as bedding for



rodents. These **should not** ever be used for any animal, as they contain oils that can cause liver and kidney damage. A preferable substrate is a recycled newspaper product or aspen wood shavings. Each type of exotic pet has its own requirements, and these should be discussed and understood to ensure a healthy pet.

**Lighting** is also of high importance in keeping exotic pets. Although it is well-recognized that reptiles require UVA and UVB light in order to process certain nutrients, many novice reptile-keepers do not realize exactly how important it is. Even nocturnal creatures will come out for a little bit to bask in and utilize the sun’s light. UV light is becoming more recognized as a necessity for birds, too. It helps regulate some

# Elburn Animal Hospital Newsletter

October, 2009



hormonal conditions, and may even help behavior disorders. Even those animals that manufacture their own vitamin D without use of sunlight benefit from a regular, controlled day/night cycle that mimics natural rhythms. As light therapy has shown favorable effects on humans, it is becoming accepted that it has similar effects for all animals.

Lack of adequate **Nutrition** is the number one reason we see exotic pets for illness. Clients are often ill-informed about what to feed, or the natural food of the pet is simply not available. Poor nutrition causes a multitude of conditions including slow weight gain, obesity, excess dander and shedding in mammals, overgrowth of beaks in birds, poor or continuous molting in birds, and incomplete shedding in reptiles, to name just a few. These are only the outward signs of illness in exotic pets. Liver disease, kidney disease, intestinal



blockage, and bone softening and deformation are harder to detect in early stages. Good nutrition is a must for exotic pets.

Our pets should be fed as close to their "wild type" diet as possible. Fresh foods are best. Offer fresh greens and grasses (pesticide-free) to herbivore friends such as rabbits, rodents, and tortoises. Whole-prey items should be fed to carnivorous animals like snakes and large lizards. Insectivores need fresh bugs that have been fed a nutritious fare to ensure their proper health. A variety of foods is always best, but do not simply feed any food. There are certain foods that are not healthy for different animals, so be sure to ask a veterinarian for advice before feeding anything new.

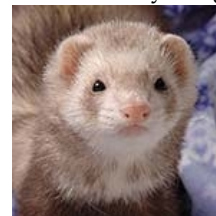
## What Kind of Veterinary Care Does My Exotic Pet Need?

All pets benefit from routine veterinary care, and exotic animals are no different. A wellness visit is highly recommended when you first acquire your pet, and a stool sample should be checked for intestinal parasites. You should bring your exotic pet in for a wellness visit at least once a year following its first exam. These animals age quickly, and changes that occur with aging are not always detectable to an untrained eye. Many exotic pets are capable of living for years given the correct husbandry techniques and proper veterinary care. For instance, a healthy cockatiel can live upwards of 20 years. Unfortunately, when their requirements are not met, too many of them pass away early on. Rats, on the other hand, live an average of only 1 ½ to 2 years, but making sure they receive routine veterinary care enables them to live healthier lives and be happier pets while we have them.

## Exotic Pets are Special

One of the reasons exotic pets tend to not reach "old age" is that many people do not understand that these animals are not commonly kept because they have specific needs that are not easily met in captivity. Most are not domesticated animals. Dogs and cats have been living with humans for thousands (if not tens of thousands) of years; they have adapted to a life with humans in many ways. They rely on humans to provide their basic needs. This is not the case with most exotic pets.

Exotic pets are largely unchanged from their wild ancestors. Even those that have been in close association with humans for a very long time are rarely truly domesticated. Ferrets are an example of this. They have been kept by humans for at least 1,000 years, but these animals were kept and bred for their hunting ability and remained unchanged from their wild type. Only within the past several



# Elburn Animal Hospital Newsletter

October, 2009

decades have ferrets been kept as companions in the home. In captivity, their exact needs are not fully known, and the mechanism of the diseases we see in ferrets is also not fully understood. How we keep ferrets in captivity and why they are affected by diseases in mid-life may be related.

Mice and rats also have long histories with humans but are still considered exotic pets. They are truly domesticated and have been changed from their wild types, but with consequences that affect their being kept as companion animals. Rats and mice were originally bred as laboratory subjects and are now susceptible to tumors of many kinds—a plus in the laboratory world as the cancers can be studied in many individuals in a short period of time, but definitely a downside to keeping these small animals. Their needs are well known, but they have specific needs and problems that must be monitored by a veterinarian.



Many other exotic pets have not been kept in captivity for nearly as long as ferrets, mice and rats. The first hamsters were imported from the wilds of Syria to the United States in 1956. The entire stock of Syrian hamsters comes from one family of twelve individuals captured in that year. The dwarf varieties of hamsters are from different species, but have only been found in the pet industry since the early-to-mid 1990s.



Leopard geckos and many other popular reptile pets have only been kept for a few decades as well. Many birds are new to the pet industry as well.

One of the problems arising from pets such as these being very new to captivity is that there are so many different mutations that are encouraged (mostly color or hair coat

mutations) that medical problems arise related to the breeding practices used to obtain these mutations. Not all of the medical significance of these types of mutations is even known at this point because breeders are constantly pushing for new and different looks.

In our November newsletter we are focusing on pain management and arthritis conditions. Many of our pets are living longer lives these days and experience more chronic pain conditions. But arthritis and pain management is not just for the elderly. Learn what to look for and different management options next month. If you have any questions or concerns, or would like more information, visit our website at [www.elburnanimalhospital.com](http://www.elburnanimalhospital.com), or give us a call at (630) 365-9599. If you would like to opt out of receiving our newsletter, please send an email to us at [3lburn@sbcglobal.net](mailto:3lburn@sbcglobal.net).

**October Special:** Receive an “exotic” wellness exam for the cost of a routine wellness exam. An \$18 savings! Make sure you mention this ad to get the discount! ☺

**Upcoming Events:** Are you ready for our annual **October Open House!** The date is Saturday, October 24<sup>th</sup>, at our office. We will have games, contests, prizes and treats for our friends—the two-legged kind and the four-legged kind! Several shelter groups will attend, and we anticipate dogs, cats, ferrets, rabbits and other small animals! Join us for some good ghoulish fun, and learn a little about pet adoption and foster-care!

Do you have an idea for a newsletter? A question you’d like answered about caring for your pet? Email us at [3lburn@sbcglobal.net](mailto:3lburn@sbcglobal.net) and let us know!

# Elburn Animal Hospital Newsletter

October, 2009

We are always interested in what you have to say, and what you want to know.