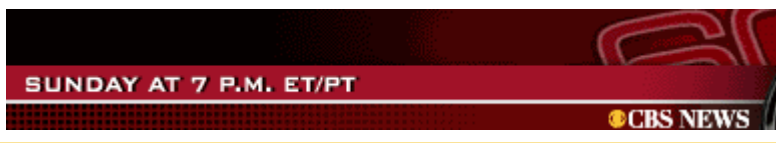


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# Less Fuss With 'Pocket Pets'

NEW YORK, Oct. 19, 2002



(CBS/AP)

**(CBS)** Are you thinking about adopting a dog or cat, but the family really doesn't have the time or space to make the commitment? *The Saturday Early Show* resident veterinarian **Debbye Turner** explains why "pocket pets" might be perfect for you.

"Pocket pets" are furry, four-legged creatures such as gerbils, hamsters, guinea pigs, and rabbits that people commonly keep as pets. The moniker "pocket pets" comes from the size of the animals, and of course their ability to fit in one's pocket.

Many people prefer these animals as pets because they take up less space, require less food, make less mess and need less training than a dog or cat. However, many people make the mistake of thinking that pocket pets require almost no care. That's not true!

The rodents' diets are highly specialized. Their housing needs frequent cleaning. And "pocket pets," by virtue of their size, require a gentle touch. Therefore, they're not suitable pets for infants and toddlers to handle. Young children have not yet learned to be gentle, and sometimes can't resist squeezing, smushing, biting and yanking the animals.

Pocket pets are great for apartment dwellers, children with proper adult supervision, or families that have limited space.

Here are some "pocket pets":

### Gerbils

*Types:* There are 80 species of gerbils. The Mongolian gerbil is the most popular as a pet.

*Traits:* Gerbils are nocturnal animals - meaning they are most active at night. Also, they are natural burrowers, so they love to dig. They are very active and playful. Gerbils are not easily scared. If they escape from their cage, they will frequently return on their own.

*Care:* Gerbils do well in a glass aquarium. The bottom of the aquarium should be covered with shredded paper or pine shavings, and it should be cleaned at least every two weeks.

*Food:* Gerbils should be fed a good quality pelleted food formulated for gerbils. Fresh fruits and vegetables are good supplements to their diet. However iceberg lettuce is not good to give them. All perishable foods should be removed from their dish after they have finished eating to prevent the danger and mess of spoiled food. They should receive fresh water daily,

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preferably in a drip container.

*Health:* Half of all pet gerbils in the U.S. have seizures due to stress and perceived threats. Gerbils may suffer diarrhea when there is an abrupt change in diet, or when antibiotics are administered improperly. Because gerbils can lose the hair on their nose due to excessive burrowing, owners should watch the nose to make sure that infection does not occur.

## **Guinea Pigs**

*Types* American, English, long-haired Peruvian

*Traits:* Guinea pigs are naturally tailless, and their teeth continue to grow throughout life. Newborns are completely covered with fur and their eyes are open. Guinea pigs are social, so it's not a bad idea to have two, because they'll keep each other company.

The pets are messy. They typically scatter their bedding and food. They are quite docile and they rarely bite, but they are easily stressed. They should be picked up gently with hands supporting their chest and back legs, and be held close to your chest, so they will feel secure. They usually have a lifespan of five years.

*Care:* Appropriate housing should be an enclosure made of plastic or metal. It needs to be "chew-proof." It should have an open top with walls too high for the guinea pig to climb out. The bottom should be covered with pine shavings or shredded paper. Do not use sawdust or cedar shavings, as these can cause respiratory problems. They need plenty of space to move around. They also need a gnawing log to keep those growing teeth in check. An untreated fruit branch is good. All waste should be cleaned out daily.

Guinea pigs should be fed a good quality pelleted food formulated for them. They need vitamin C, just like humans. You can supplement their diet with diced fruits and vegetables (kale and cabbage are good). But, avoid high-sugar citrus fruits like oranges. All perishable foods should be removed from their dish after they are finished eating to prevent the danger and mess of spoiled food. They should receive fresh water daily, preferably in a drip container.

*Health:* Guinea pigs can get submandibular abscesses (under the jaw). Hair loss may be due to a fungal infection (ringworm) or ectoparasites (mange). Heat stress and allergies can cause pneumonia. Diarrhea can occur when there is an abrupt change in diet, or when antibiotics are administered improperly. Excessive salivation (ptyalism) is usually due to overgrown teeth.

## **Hamsters**

*Types:* The golden hamster is most common type of hamster kept as a pet in the U.S.

*Traits:* Hamsters are nocturnal (most active at night) and solitary creatures. They are friendly to humans, but they might not be keen on sharing their home with other hamsters. Do not awaken a sleeping hamster. They may be less than friendly, as a result. The lifespan of a hamster is 18 to 24 months.

*Care:* Hamsters should be kept in a container made of glass or very hard plastic (so they can't chew it), open at the top, with walls too high for them to climb out. Housing should be cleaned at least twice weekly. Shredded paper or pine shavings should be on the bottom of the container. Avoid cedar shavings, which can cause respiratory problems. Provide something for your hamster to "hide" in like an old tissue box or oatmeal container. Hamsters really get around in the wild, so an exercise wheel will really help them use that extra energy.

Hamsters should be fed a pelleted food formulated for hamsters. They should receive fresh water daily, preferably in a drip container. You can treat your hamster with spinach, lettuce, carrots and apples. All perishable foods should be removed from their dish after they are finished eating to prevent the danger

and mess of spoiled food. Do not feed your hamster raw beans, apple seeds, sprouting potatoes, parsley or the green part of a tomato. All of the foods just listed can be poisonous to them.

*Health:* Hair loss may be due to a fungal infection (ringworm) or ectoparasites (mange). Diarrhea can occur when there is an abrupt change in diet, or when antibiotics are administered improperly.

### **Mice**

*Traits* A mouse tail is as long as the body. They have poor eyesight and a keen ability to hear. Their teeth grow continuously throughout life. Their lifespan is 18 months to three years.

### *Rats*

*Traits* Rats are very social. They like having other rats around. They are nocturnal (active at night). They have poor eyesight, but they have a keen sense of smell and hearing. Their lifespan is two to a little over three years.

"Pocket pets" may be easier to maintain than larger animals, but they still need the owner's care and attention

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