

Rabbits, hamsters, guinea-pigs...

John Hoare advises on looking after the small furies

The British have a reputation for being an animal-loving people. It was estimated that in 2003 almost half the households in the UK had a pet of one sort or another. While I was gathering related details, I was surprised to find that goldfish were by far the most numerous: but of the mammalian species, as one might expect, cats topped the league at 9.2 million, dogs came second at 6.5 million, and the runners-up were the small furry creatures. There were 1.1 million rabbits, 860,000 hamsters and 730,000 guinea pigs kept as pets in the UK in 2003. Their popularity is most likely due to a combination of their being comparatively cheap to buy and to keep, the fact that they can be kept in a relatively small place without the need for long walks twice a day (dogs), or the risk

of road accidents and fights (cats), while cynics would say that their short life-span means that Mum is not left as their sole carer for too long once the initial novelty of looking after them has vanished from the children.

Lifestyle

This article is not meant to be a comprehensive guide to keeping small furry pets. Rather it is intended to be an aid to maintaining them in a state of good health, using homeopathic principles and medicines. Hahnemann in Aphorism 3 of the *Organon* instructs us, when treating disease, to “know the obstacles to cure and how to remove them, so that recovery is permanent”. These obstacles, he tells us later are such factors as bad housing with poor ventilation, a poor

or inappropriate diet, a lack of exercise and fresh air, physical and mental over-exertion, continuing emotional stress and so on. The corollary to all this is that we must provide good food, good accommodation and suitable exercise if our pets are to remain healthy. The detail of these factors is beyond the scope of this article, but libraries are full of books on what they call “animal management” and for those who are computer enthusiasts there are numerous websites dedicated to educating the new carer of all the species of small furry creatures currently kept as pets.

It is, alas, only too true that having a healthy lifestyle does not fully prevent



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Children playing with their pets may inadvertently hurt them

disease states from developing. Accidents will happen, and one's genetic inheritance makes one more or less susceptible to certain types of disease. No one is immune to accidental injuries from one's own actions nor to the results of the actions of others, be they deliberate or not, whilst "sickly creatures" with poor constitutions are liable to develop disease conditions in spite of a theoretically perfect lifestyle.

Medicine box

Carers of all species of animals should therefore have a medicine box so that they can apply first aid measures following accidents, and when simple diseases occur. Here I must remind you that the contents of the medicine box are for first aid only. If your charge is seriously injured, or if its illness does not respond quickly to your treatment, then veterinary attention should be sought. Ideally, this advice and assistance should be from a homeopathically trained veterinary surgeon. These are, however, rather sparse on the ground. If you are in a barren district, take the advice of the local veterinary surgeon. You can always supplement his conventional treatment with homeopathic remedies if such support is needed.

Where there is illness rather than injury you must remember that rabbits, guinea-pigs etc are "prey species" and therefore hide any weaknesses for as long as possible to prevent themselves being identified as easy prey by a predator. If the first remedy that you try does not appear to be working, it is better to seek veterinary advice early on than to persevere with remedy after remedy in the hope of finding the right one while the patient deteriorates.

Giving remedies

The administration of homeopathic remedies to the small furrries is difficult. It is hard to get tablets, crushed or not, into their mouths. Tablets can be powdered and the powder dissolved in the contents of their drinking bottles, but do not fill the bottle more than two-thirds full. Do not be too worried if the tablets do not dissolve completely. If you succuss the drinking bottle (bang the bottle and its medicated contents ten times on a hard-covered book), all its contents will be potentised and the patient will receive a small dose every time it drinks. It is as well to wrap the body of the bottle with brown paper to keep light out, as there is a suspicion that light can degrade a potentised solution.



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First aid

Getting back to the medicine box, what should it contain? It is unlikely that a small furry will be involved in a road traffic accident. They can be, and often are, dropped; they are sometimes squashed in doors and occasionally they get bitten by other animals. The medicine box should therefore contain most of the common vulneraries.

Shock is bound to be present after any trauma. This means that Aconite should be given immediately. I prefer Aconite 30c and it can be administered as a powder (crushed tablet) if the animal is badly shocked.

This should be followed by Arnica 30c where there is bruising from falls, being squashed or bites that have torn the skin badly. Ledum 30c can be given if the bite is a seemingly small, but painful one, such as a cat bite.

Calendula 30c will help all open

wounds to heal and should be combined with Hypericum 30c if it is on a limb or the tail. Hypericum, you will remember, aids nerve pain especially in crushed extremities.

I have seen dogs and cats that have had hot fat spilled on them after tripping their owner up in the kitchen. I have not seen it in a house rabbit, but no doubt it has already occurred. In this case give Aconite initially and then Cantharis 6c. If treatment is still needed on the second day, change to Causticum 30c.

Do not forget that you are giving first aid and that veterinary advice should be sought if the injury is severe or if there is no quick response in a lesser one. You can always support any conventional treatment with homeopathy.

If any wounds turn septic, then Hepar sulph 6c can be given initially where there is a lot of pain.



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Teeth

All the small furry creatures can develop overgrown teeth and this adversely affects their ability to eat. This means that their teeth have to be trimmed, and your local veterinary surgeon can do this for you. A general anaesthetic is often needed in rabbits and guinea pigs in order that a good job may be made of trimming or filing them down. In this case Aconite may be given to help protect against the shock of the handling that is involved, whilst Arnica can be given the day before and after to reduce any bruising. Making good quality hay available in the diet can help prevent the overgrowth from developing in the first place.

Skin problems

All the species are liable to develop skin troubles. These are usually associated with parasites of one kind or another. Since homeopathic remedies are unable to kill any living organisms, it is usually best to get a veterinary surgeon to check for parasites and, if they are present, then to use a conventional parasiticide supported either by a suitable local remedy, or preferably by a well-chosen constitutional remedy. You will almost certainly need the assistance of a homeopathic vet to find the constitutional remedy.

There are a multitude of remedies used for skin problems. In general, Merc sol 30c is useful for acute wet eczemas, and Graphites 6c if there is a honey-like pus present, often under a thick scab or crust. Arsenicum album 30c is indicated in dry, itchy skin conditions with lots of scales or “dandruff” in animals that need to be very warm and are restless especially in the late evening, whilst Sulphur 30c is more suited to animals that prefer to be cool and have hot, red itchy

skins. Creams and tinctures made from Calendula and Hypericum are available. Do remember to dilute tinctures before use though. I use five drops in half a wine glass of cold boiled water. Creams tend to matt the fur, whilst lotions can be dabbed on carefully or even brushed on. Calendula helps skin healing whilst Hypericum helps to reduce any associated pains. Lotions and creams containing both remedies, known as Hypercal, are also available and this makes a good general purpose skin application.

Abscesses

These are fairly common in these small creatures and are usually the result of fighting. These may need to be lanced by a veterinary surgeon, but homeopathic remedies can be used to support the antibiotics that the vet will almost certainly prescribe. If the abscess is very painful Hepar sulph 6c or 30c can be given; whilst if the abscess is not painful, as is often the case in rabbits, Silica 6c or 30c should be used. It should be noted that many “cold” abscesses around the head of rabbits are actually based on a bad tooth. This means that no amount of antibiotic or homeopathic remedies will cure the abscess until the offending tooth has been dealt with by a veterinary surgeon. If one of your pets keeps developing abscesses then its immunity can often be strengthened by using Echinacea 6c for a five to seven day period.

Enteritis

All species may of course develop enteritis, with its common sign – diarrhoea. Any case of diarrhoea that persists for more than 48 hours should be seen by a veterinary surgeon. If you think that the cause could be a sudden change in the diet, or too rich a diet, Nux vomica 6c can be tried. If bad food is suspected, the stools are foul-smelling and brown in colour and the patient is restless and drinking a little and often, then try Arsenicum album 30c. Should there be blood in the stool and the patient drooling saliva, Mercurius corrosivus may be

indicated, while Sulphur 6c can be tried for diarrhoea that has an offensive odour and only occurs in the morning. Phosphoric acid 6c or China officinalis 6c can help patients to build themselves up again and recover their strength.

Gerbils and hamsters are prone to developing a form of diarrhoea which “scalds” the skin around the anus, the belly and tail. This is known as “wet tail” and is usually fatal in a few days if left untreated. Stress factors are involved in its development – usually weaning but sometimes with a change of owner/attendant. Capsicum 30c can be very effective in such cases but veterinary advice should certainly be sought for the poor creatures.

Diarrhoea in rabbits and guinea-pigs that have access to the garden in summer can be the cause of “fly strike”. In this case the diarrhoea soils the animal’s fur. This attracts blow flies which lay their eggs in the soiled fur. When the eggs hatch out into maggots, they begin to eat the flesh of the rabbit. Often this is not noticed until bits of skin begin to fall off. Veterinary help will certainly be needed to clean the area and remove every last maggot. When the wound has been cleaned Hypericum and Calendula can be put in the drinking water (as described above) while diluted Hypercal tincture can be used as a dressing.

Eyes and ears

Eye and ear conditions are relatively rare except that caused by mites in rabbits’ ears. Veterinary advice should be sought early on in all cases, and the treatment supported by diluted Hypercal tincture in the case of ears, and diluted Euphrasia tincture for eyes.

And finally

The small furies can be a source of great happiness for a growing family and I hope that this short article will help you to enjoy their company as much as possible for as long as possible. Don’t forget however that all life is mortal, and there may well come a time when Ignatia is required, not by the pet, but by the carers. I wish you good luck much happiness while you care for your charges.



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