

Bianca Zaffarano, D.V.M.

*N*utrition for *Pocket Pets*

by *Jan McAuthur, RVT*

Small rodents have always been popular pets. Hamsters, gerbils, mice, rats, and guinea pigs, as well as the lagomorphs (rabbits) are the most commonly kept "pocket pets".

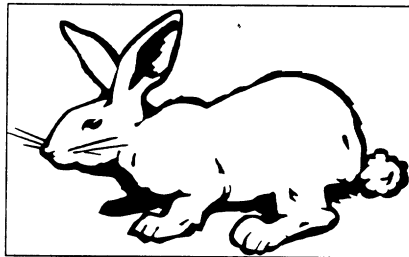
Among pet owners it may not be widely known that because all of these species have been used extensively in laboratory research their nutritional requirements have been studied in detail for years. Laboratory research has made it possible for pet food manufacturers to produce high quality foods for your pets. Good nutrition is one of the essential keys to a longer, healthier life for your pets.

None of these pets should be fed seed mixes as the staple diet. Seed mixes allow the pet to pick and choose only those seeds that taste good to them. The seeds that they tend to choose are the seeds high in fat, feeding these seed mixes leads them to become overweight, malnourished, and to develop skin conditions. All these are problems that can easily be avoided with a better diet.

Having come from laboratory re-

search, "lab blocks" are available to the pet trade now under many different brand names and should be used as the main diet for your pets. Lab blocks have much of the same ingredients as the seed mixes, however, these seeds are ground and then formed into the block, so the nutrition needed for them is all in one package just as it is for dog and cat foods.

If you start your pocket pets on the blocks or pellets at the time they are weaned they will become accustomed to eating them. Starting an older pet that has only eaten seed mix will be more difficult to convert, but it can be done. Some pet owners worry that processed dog and cat foods do not



contain 100 percent nutritional value because of the processing. This fear may be felt about the lab blocks too, but as long as you feed these as the staple diet, you can supplement their diets with fresh vegetables, fruits, and a small amount of grains and cereals.

Fresh vegetables, fruits, and grains are healthy treats for them, much better for the pocket pet than those treats packaged for them. The

prepackaged treats are generally made from seeds high in fat and are often loaded with sugar. For those reasons, they are a poor choice as treats.

In general the lab blocks sold for hamsters, gerbils, and mice will do fine for rats too. Sometimes the bags are not marked for rats but the nutritional requirements for these small rodents are basically the same, there are only minor differences. The blocks produced for small rodents shouldn't be fed to rabbits and guinea pigs. The small rodents are omnivores whereas rabbits and guinea pigs are herbivores; the nutritional requirements are very different. The protein levels required by herbivores are not the same as those needed for omnivores; therefore, the protein must come from different sources. Feeding animal based protein to a herbivore will upset the digestive tract causing the animal to become ill over time. Amino acids in protein derived from plants differ from those of animal based proteins..

Diets developed specifically for rabbits and guinea pigs are available and are the best choice. Both of these species should have good quality timothy or other grass type hay available to them on a daily basis. It's thought that alfalfa hay is too high in calcium, so the current recommendation is to use timothy hay.

Glass hays are not needed for the small rodents and can actually cause harm to them by injuring their tiny feet.

For rabbits the fiber levels in the diet need special attention. A level lower than 15 percent may increase the chances of anorexia and diarrhea, but over 16 percent fiber reduces palatability of the feed. However, a fiber content of 18-22 percent helps prevent obesity in pets. Measured amounts of

a quality pellet feed with supplements of grass hay and a variety of greens are best for rabbits. Another recommendation would be to feed no pellets at all. Instead feed

free-choice hay diet with supplements of fresh vegetables. These methods of feeding are recommended for them to prevent obesity, overeating and diarrhea.

Guinea pigs are the only species in the group that lack the enzyme L-gulonolactone oxidase. This enzyme is involved in the synthesis of ascorbic acid. This means they cannot produce their own vitamin C and that must be supplemented for them through the diet. Commercially produced guinea pig diets may state on the label that extra "vitamin C has been added", but keep in mind that the vitamin is not stable and will break down as the food ages. It's best to assume that the food has no vitamin C and the owner should supplement the diet with foods

naturally high in the vitamin, such as fruits and vegetables. Kale, parsley, dark leafy greens, bell peppers, broccoli, tomatoes, kiwi fruit, and oranges are good sources of natural vitamin C.

Make sure your pets have clean, fresh water available at all times. Disinfect their homes at least once a week and use high quality bedding. Feed your pets the highest quality feeds possible for a long healthy life. You'll be glad you did!

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