

# Give Your Gerbil a Health Check!

Gerbils are incredibly healthy compared with most other pet rodents and 90% of them never need veterinary treatment in their life. If you spend a lot of time with your pets, then it is likely that you would soon notice if anything were wrong. But what exactly do you look for? As someone who has kept Gerbils for 30 years, I have probably come across most of the health problems that you are likely to encounter. Here are just a few things to look for:

## **1 - Observe what all your Gerbils are doing at least once a day**

If a Gerbil is huddled in a corner all by itself, its fur is all bedraggled and it looks miserable, then something is definitely wrong and you should seek immediate veterinary treatment. Try offering a sunflower seed. If the Gerbil does not immediately seize on it and eat it, then you should be very worried. An even more worrying sign is when a Gerbil isolates itself completely from its cage-mate(s). In fact I have found that once a Gerbil has isolated itself in this way, this is usually an indication that death is imminent.

## **2 - Hold your Gerbils close to your ear**

If a Gerbil makes a clicking or rasping noise, it probably has a chest infection. This is particularly common in young Gerbils just passed weaning and elderly Gerbils when the weather is abnormally cold or hot. Prompt antibiotic treatment is essential. In the UK this has to be prescribed by a vet. I prefer an injection rather than drops in the water or food, as it is easier to ensure the correct dosage. However, this will mean you have to visit the surgery for 3 to 5 days for treatment.

## **3 - Examine your Gerbil's scent gland**

All Gerbils have a scent gland in the middle of their tummy. This is long, thin and yellow in colour. It is sometimes mistaken for a wound or tumour. Gerbils mark their territory by rubbing their scent gland on it. Male Gerbils kept with other males are particularly prone to scent gland tumours. Excessive marking of territory causes the tumour. It starts off just looking like a pimple. Sometimes it never develops beyond this stage. Sometimes it grows rapidly and starts to bleed. Although it does not spread to other parts of the body, it can grow internally as well as externally and compromise internal organs. If the tumour bleeds, it can also get infected. Removal is a simple surgical procedure. It almost always results in 100% cure and is therefore well worth the expense.

## **4 - Examine your Gerbil's nose**

Sore noses are one of the most common Gerbil health problems. They can be caused by allergy to bedding (especially cedar), over enthusiastic burrowing with the nose, or stress. Whatever the initial cause, the main problem is that sore becomes infected with bacteria and needs treating with an antibiotic ointment. Again in the UK this has to be prescribed by a vet. Although a sore nose is a trivial ailment in itself, if left untreated the infection can spread to the rest of the body and in rare cases result in fatal septicaemia, so treatment is essential.

## **5 - Examine your Gerbil's teeth**

Often the first time an owner realises there is a tooth problem, is when the Gerbil rapidly loses weight but otherwise appears healthy. On examination it will be found to have lost one or more of its front teeth. This means it cannot eat its usual food and needs a soft diet e.g. baby food, biscuit crumb, bread soaked in milk. Usually the tooth grows back again within a week. Meanwhile, the Gerbil cannot gnaw and the remaining teeth may grow too long and require trimming. This is not as difficult as it sounds. The first time it happens, you may need a vet to show you what to do, but after that you should be able to trim the teeth yourself. An excellent test for teeth problems is to offer your Gerbil a piece of paper. It will immediately try to chew it. All Gerbils do. It's instinctive. If the teeth are able to cut the paper, they are fine. However, if they can't, then there is a problem.

## **6 - Examine your Gerbil's coat**

The odd scab, especially around the base of the tail, probably indicates fighting has broken out. This may have been a trivial argument over an extra-large sunflower seed. But it may also be a warning of worse to come. You need to monitor the situation carefully. External parasites are rare on Gerbils. However, if your Gerbil has an inflamed, scabby, bald round patch on its coat, then it could just possibly be ringworm. This is highly contagious. Take no chances and consult your vet.

## **7 - Examine your Gerbil's tail**

It comes as something of a shock when your Gerbil suddenly emerges minus half of its tail. The Gerbil's tail with its striking black tip, is designed so it is easily shed if caught by a predator. The same thing can happen if you pick up the Gerbil by the tip of its tail or if the Gerbil gets its tail trapped underneath something. It looks awful. There is a lot of blood and the tail bone is exposed. However, 99% of broken tails heal without veterinary treatment. Within a few days, the bone just withers away and the Gerbil is left with half a tail. It may not look as beautiful but its ability to get around and generally get on with its life is not impeded in any way.

## **8 - Examine how your Gerbil moves around**

A tendency to go round in circles or hold its head in a tilted position suggest an inner ear problem. It could be an infection, so antibiotic treatment is a good precaution. However, the cause is more likely to be a small cyst-like growth in the ear. Once a Gerbil has developed a head-tilt, it will never go away. However, it soon adapts to a lopsided life.

If your Gerbil is limping or holding one of its paws in the air, it could have a sprain or even a small break in one of its limbs. Unless the animal looks in distress, it is best to leave it alone and let it heal naturally. In most cases it will do so without veterinary treatment.

If your Gerbil appears paralysed down one side or is dragging its hind legs, it could have had a stroke. There is not a lot you can do apart from keeping it warm and making sure it has access to food and water. This may mean you have to feed it by hand. If the Gerbil is going to recover, it should do so within a week. A slight disability such as a limp may always remain. If the Gerbil does not recover sufficiently to allow it to have a reasonable quality of life, then it may be kinder to have it put to sleep.

## **9 - Examine your Gerbil's sex organs**

Females that have had many litters occasionally get a prolapse of the uterus. Males occasionally get swollen penises. A vet should treat both.

## **10 - Smell around your Gerbil's cage**

Diarrhoea in Gerbils is extremely rare. In the unlikely event of your Gerbil having diarrhoea, your nose will soon alert you to the problem. Your suspicions will be confirmed by staining around the anus and base of the tail. Diarrhoea in Gerbils is unlikely to be caused by over-indulgence in fruit and vegetables as it can be in other rodents. Gerbils simply don't like these foods enough to over-indulge. (Unlike, their cousin the Shaw's jird, who do love their veggies and sometimes get loose bowels as a result of this). Diarrhoea in Gerbils is likely to have a more serious cause and is sometimes the first sign of the deadly Tyzzer's disease. Seek veterinary advice immediately.

Finally when treating a sick Gerbil, do not separate it from its cage-mates. This will cause it further stress and it will probably be impossible to put the Gerbils back together again when it has recovered. If it is suffering from a potentially infectious illness, then treat all Gerbils in the cage and put the cage in a different room from any other caged rodents that you have in your house.

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