

Environmental Enrichment for small animals

Rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters, gerbils, chinchillas, rats and other “small furrries” are naturally very active and inquisitive animals. They like to keep themselves busy, and when allowed, spend the majority of their time running around and investigating their surroundings.

“Small furrries” are often misunderstood, possibly because many of them are silent creatures and cannot vocalise their requests as easy as cats and dogs can. Owners assume that their silent pets are happy in their cages, with little else to do but eat and sleep. This can lead to very bored pets suffering from depression, which can result in health problems and in the worst scenarios, premature death. It has been reported by the **RSPCA** that **domestic rabbits are one of the most neglected and ill-treated pets in the UK** because they spend most of their lives in solitude, imprisoned in their hutches at the bottom of the garden.

Wild relatives of our domesticated pets however spend the majority of their time investigating their surroundings, foraging and selecting an appropriate diet from their environment, most small furrries are sociable species and spend much time interacting with fellow members of their species. These natural instincts to forage, explore and socialise are still present in domesticated animals so denying pets these activities is cruel and can easily be avoided, it takes just a little time, a few household items and a bit of imagination.....

Simple and easy steps to happy and healthy pets

1. Always **socialise** your animals everyday. Handling and grooming is a pleasurable experience for the owner and animal. It gives the animal something to look forward to each day and it is also a good opportunity to check the health of your animal. Look for cuts, lumps, runny eyes, a dirty bottom or diarrhoea, overgrown teeth and changes in behaviour and feeding habits. The earlier you spot these symptoms the easier and more effectively you can treat disorders or diseases.
2. Allow your pet to **explore** his/her surroundings (out of the cage or hutch) **every day**. Supervise your animals to make sure they do not escape or cause harm to themselves or their surroundings.

It is important to remember that most small animals are **prey** in the wild, so understandably they have a dislike of big wide-open spaces, and when approached from above (i.e. to pick them up) it induces fright and their natural instinct is to hide. Always approach your animal on the same level as them, crouch in front of them and let them come to you.

You will also see that generally your animals will explore the periphery or hiding places first, rather than the middle of an area or run. If you randomly place objects like tubes, tunnels, untreated wicker baskets and boxes in their run or area to play, you will see them investigate more of the available area.



Boxes, tunnels and natural wicker baskets make ideal playthings

3. Provide a variety of **toys** for your pet to play with. These needn't be expensive.
 - Smaller animals e.g. hamsters like to explore and chew empty toilet rolls, empty yoghurt pots and pieces of cardboard.
 - Larger animals like to look under, hide in or climb onto empty cardboard boxes, natural wicker baskets and plastic flowerpots. Chimney pots and clay/plastic pipes (of appropriate sizes) make good hiding places and excellent tunnels. Rotating or swapping the position of each object, or the objects available to explore, provides extra interest for the animal as it runs around re-investigating its surroundings.
 - Large “furries” like rabbits and guinea pigs are attracted to noisy toys. Cat balls, complete with a jingle bell, can occupy your pet as it knocks it and flings it around. Hard plastic baby mobiles also have a similar appeal.
 - Smaller animals like hamsters may appreciate a wheel to exercise in. Beware of them becoming addicted to endlessly running around a wheel, if this occurs you should limit the use to only a portion of the day, e.g. a couple of hours in the evening. Then your pet will have something to look forward to each day.
 - Piles of logs (natural wood: beech, hazel and apple) make interesting platforms to explore, and also benefit dental health, animals are able to chew the wood and so wear their continuously growing teeth down.

4. Feeding time for a domestic animal is often over in minutes, whereas in the wild, feeding occupies animals for many hours. By hiding portions of their daily allocation of feed under cardboard boxes or empty plant or yoghurt pots, or in different areas of the animal's cage, your pet will be forced to hunt for its food which will occupy your pet for longer, keeping boredom at bay. You could also try hiding some treats.

Supreme Petfoods have designed **Russel and Frankie's feeding ball** for rabbits and ferrets, which encourages foraging behaviour and lengthens eating time. The animal has to work for its food, which is

delivered in small portions as the ball is pushed around and played with. This is particularly good for house rabbits, as it diverts the attention of the animal away from the household furniture.

5. Wild animals also have the opportunity to selectively feed on a variety of different plant and where appropriate, animal matter, which gives the animal a range of textures and materials with which to wear down their teeth. Small furries have continuously growing teeth, which need to be worn down every day. You should provide **untreated wood** (branches or twigs, or a pile of logs for larger animals) and cardboard to enable dental wear. It may also prevent your pet from gnawing things of value, that you would not like them to get their teeth into. Guinea pigs, rabbits, chinchillas and degus benefit from lots of hay (fibre) which is a necessity in the diet, but also effectively keeps teeth worn down.



Chewing wood keeps continuously growing teeth worn down, preventing dental problems and boredom

6. Edible treats provide extra variety to your pet's diet. They are designed to be fed occasionally, **in small amounts only**. When used correctly they are a healthy supplement to your pets diet, and also an ideal way to reward a pet for good behaviour, or to encourage your animal to come to you, or be groomed. Treats may be purchased: the range by **Supreme** are specially formulated for individual animals e.g. **Russel Rabbit's "Carrot and Leek Cookie Treats"**, **Charlie Chinchilla's "Cracker treats"**, **Gerty Guinea pig's "Herbie treats"** and **Reggie's "Rat'a' chewy treats"**. These are extremely palatable and healthy supplements. Alternatively you could provide your pet with some natural supplements such as fresh fruit and vegetables.



Promoting the Well-Being of Small Animals

A species-specific list is included below. Remember to break or cut treats into appropriate sizes for your pet. NB only feed small amounts of green leafy vegetables where appropriate, because overfeeding can cause bloat and excess dietary calcium.

A list of species specific treats

Hamster:

Beechnuts
Brazil nuts (1/4)
Walnut
Raisin
Dog biscuit
Toast
Yoghurt (1/4 tsp)
Swede
Broccoli
Carrot
Hard boiled egg
Grapes
Apple
Strawberry
Tomato
Dandelion
Chopped cooked meat
Mealworm

Chinchilla:

Apple
Satsuma
Raisins
Carrot
Peanuts
Hazelnuts
Rose hips
Wild herbs
Dry bread

Rat:

Brown rice
Root and leafy vegetables
Dog biscuits
Dog food
Cooked meat scraps
Chicken bones
Mealworm
Cooked pulses
Natural yoghurt (1/2 tsp)
Apples
Cherries
Grapes
Banana
Tomato
Pear
Wholemeal pasta / bread
Unsweetened breakfast cereal
Popcorn

Rabbit and Guinea pig:

Fresh grass
Parsley
Dandelion
Carrot
Apple
Kiwi
Alfalfa
Celery
Broccoli
Cauliflower
Cabbage
Swede
Tomato

Degu:

Sweet potato
Dandelion
Clover
Alfalfa
Peanuts
Chopped nuts
Sunflower seeds
Dried corn
Lettuce
Broccoli
Cucumber
Cauliflower
Green beans

Gerbil:

Banana
Apple
Cabbage
Sprout
Hard boiled egg
Grated cheese
Melon / pumpkin seeds
Raisins
Sunflower seeds
Cat/dog biscuits



Promoting the Well-Being of Small Animals

Raspberry
Wholemeal bread

Tomato
Diluted carrot or vegetable juice
(non-sweetened)