

## ACCES for Pet Health

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### Exotics and Emergencies

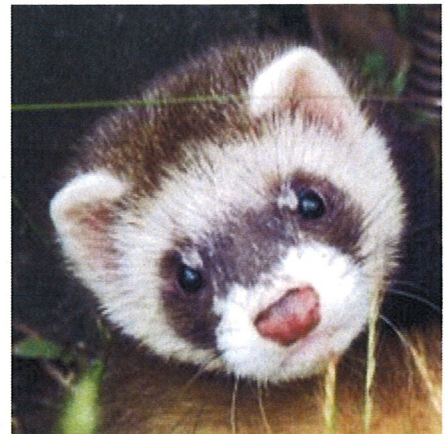
By Dr. Beth Guerra



Increasingly, more 'exotic' animals such as ferrets, rabbits, sugar gliders, and birds, are becoming common household pets. Although there are many veterinarians available with advanced training to deal with these species, they are not always available on an emergency basis. At ACCES, we do see all types of exotic pets and are familiar with the more common emergencies. We work to stabilize these pets and transfer them in the morning or the next business day for ongoing management with their exotics vet.

#### *Ferrets*

The most critical emergency of ferrets is typically an insulinoma. These are tumors in the pancreas that produce too much insulin and cause profound hypoglycemia (low blood sugar). They can occur in ferrets between 3-8 years of age but are most commonly seen in ferrets 4-5 years old. Usually these animals present to the ER with extreme lethargy or a sudden onset of seizures due to the low blood glucose. More gradual symptoms, such as weight loss, hypersalivation, or occasional 'dazed' mentation can also occur. Low blood glucose is confirmed with a blood test during the initial examination. Treatment varies from medical to surgical; initially the ferret is given dextrose intravenously, however, care must be taken not to elevate the blood sugar too quickly as this will precipitate more insulin release from the tumor. These ferrets can be started on prednisone or diazoxide to try and inhibit insulin release and increase production of glucose by the liver. Alternatively, surgery can be pursued to try and resect the pancreatic tumor.



Ferrets also have a propensity to seek out and ingest foreign bodies, especially rubber. Bits of these materials can cause a GI obstruction. Obstructed ferrets usually do not vomit, but they may be inappetent, exhibit abdominal pain, or develop diarrhea. Due to their small size and generally lean body condition, foreign bodies can often be palpated on physical exam. X-rays or ultrasound can help confirm the presence of an obstruction. Fluid support and pain control may help the object to pass, but often these animals need exploratory surgery to remove the obstruction.

#### *Rabbits*

Most rabbit owners are aware of their need to constantly graze in order to maintain GI health. Rabbits are hindgut fermenters and must eat large amounts of fiber to maintain cecal and colonic motility and overall health. A fair number of GI emergencies in rabbits stem from inappropriate diet or husbandry. Gastric stasis is a common condition in rabbits that are fed a higher carbohydrate (pelleted) diet with limited fiber. In stressed rabbits, a doughy mass of hair within the stomach can accumulate from excessive grooming. These rabbits are usually off their food for a period of days and the amount of fecal pellets is significantly decreased. With gastric stasis comes disruption of the normal GI environment; this can lead to shock or death within a few days. Treatment is supportive and is aimed at rehydration, pain control, and restoring gastric motility. In the case of a large hairball, surgery can be pursued but is extremely risky in the compromised rabbit.



#### *Reptiles*

Metabolic bone disease usually presents as an emergency even though it develops over time. This condition of low calcium, known as hyperparathyroidism, can be due to inadequate nutrition or renal disease. Most of the cases we see are in reptiles that have inadequate calcium in their diets or are not provided with proper UV lighting.

Low amounts of calcium in the diet prompt the body to absorb calcium from the bone. This is replaced with fibrous tissue, which further weakens the integrity of the bones. The jaw, facial bones, and long bones are most commonly affected. These reptiles usually present as thin and weak with a swollen appearance to the limbs from the abnormal skeleton. They are often reluctant to walk and can have spinal deformities. Pathologic fractures are common; the bone will break under the weight of the body. Tetany and muscle spasms can also occur. If the jaw is malformed, eating becomes difficult.

Both immediate and long term action are required. Treatment focuses on rehydration, calcium supplementation, and fixation of any fractures, usually with a splint. Calcium supplementation is usually needed, even if the animal is being fed greens that are higher in calcium. It is also important to provide UVB, not incandescent, light. These lights can be purchased from specialty stores and should be replaced every 6 months or so.

### *Birds*

Most birds, especially very small species such as finches, cockatiels, and parakeets, become stressed very easily when handled while sick. This can make examination difficult and limits the amount of time you have to assess a patient. History and husbandry become a very important part of the physical exam. Upon arrival, our avian emergencies are triaged to the ICU and placed in a special incubator with heat and oxygen. The doctor will perform a physical exam as much as the patient will tolerate. Diagnostics are usually performed in a stepwise fashion as excessive manipulation of a bird in shock can be fatal.

A fair number of avian emergencies constitute trauma, whether the bird has flown into a stationary object or has been attacked by a cage-mate or other household pet such as a cat or dog. Injuries can range from minor skin wounds to extensive fractures and internal bleeding. The approach to treatment is not much different from mammals, although certain techniques, such as blood draw or fracture repair can be quite challenging in small birds.

Respiratory distress constitutes another common emergency. Birds can present with upper respiratory infections, obstructions from seeds, or even nasal parasites. Lower respiratory diseases are common, including bacterial or fungal infections of the lungs or air sacs. Because these patients can be medically fragile, they are usually given supplemental oxygen before diagnostics such as x-rays are attempted.

Female birds can become egg bound while trying to lay eggs. The egg can either be retained within the abdominal cavity or visible from the cloacal opening. Egg bound birds are often lethargic, not eating, and occasionally can have limb paralysis from the pressure of the egg. Retained eggs can rupture and lead to peritonitis. Treatment is supportive and is aimed at keeping the bird warm and hydrated in an attempt to help the egg pass. Similarly, if a bird is straining excessively after passing an egg, the oviduct (reproductive tract) can be prolapsed outside the body. This requires immediate attention as the organ can become devitalized the longer it is outside the body.

If you have an "exotic" pet, make sure you research the proper husbandry and diet as you can often avoid some of these conditions. Ask your veterinary clinic if they will accommodate these species. If not, there is a growing number of veterinarians in the Seattle area with extensive training to deal with both emergencies and routine care of these unusual pets. It is best to know about the resources available before an emergency occurs.

Posted by **Christina Ryan** at June 30, 2010 12:00 a.m.

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