

We don't have dogs or cats, but do enjoy our birds and guinea pigs. What should we do if one of our pets is sick or has a medical emergency?

First, ask yourself what would you do if this were a dog or cat? Most likely, the first thing that popped into your head was to call your veterinarian for advice or to find out if it is serious enough to schedule an appointment. Why couldn't you do that for your, what are often called, exotic pet? Turns out, you can.

Exotic pets should see a veterinarian on an annual basis, just like dogs and cats. For the smaller ones (i.e. hamsters, gerbils, rats, mice) with shorter life expectancies, ideally these visits should be every 6 months. These exams are needed to make sure your pet is healthy and their husbandry (the way you take care of it) is appropriate. Did you know that about 90% of the health problems we see in these creatures could be avoided with appropriate husbandry? Your veterinarian can give you important information on the proper type of cage, bedding, lighting, food, treats, and exercise.

Just like dogs and cats, these little guys can get sick, and it usually happens when the vet's office is closed. What should you do? If it's a true emergency (i.e. broken bone, bleeding, difficulty breathing, etc.), call the local veterinary emergency hospital to find out if they are able to stabilize or treat your pet. If your pet is just starting to act a little differently call your local exotic pet veterinarian. Then remember these next three words – warm, dark and quiet.

Warm, dark, and quiet - this is the type of environment you want to set up for them at home until they can get into a doctor. As some examples: you have a cockatiel with fluffed feathers and a decreased appetite, your hamster seems to have diarrhea, or you notice your snake is rejecting its meals. Place them in a small cage with minimal perching opportunities to minimize any likelihood of falling. Make sure food and water is easily accessible to them. Put a heating pad on the outside underneath half of the cage. Cover this end with a towel and place them in a quieter area of the house until you can get to your veterinarian.

Remember – when you arrive at the vet's office, be prepared to answer questions about what they eat normally, their bathroom habits, and their normal environment at home in addition to details surrounding their current problem.

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