

## Looking After Small Animals in Hot Weather



We all know how changeable the weather is here in the UK so it's so easy to be caught unawares when the weather suddenly changes and turns into a scorch!

Here are some useful hints and tips that you should adopt to make sure that if we do suddenly experience a heat wave, our small furry pets don't suffer.

**GENERAL** - smaller pets, such as rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters, gerbils, rats, ferrets and mice are generally kept in enclosed spaces such as cages and hutches. As the animals are restricted in their movement because of these living spaces, it is your responsibility to ensure that they are comfortable and safe during periods of hot weather.

### THE SIGNS OF HEATSTROKE

Heatstroke or **HYPERTHERMIA** can be identified from several visible symptoms or behaviours that your pet will display:

- Panting.
- Bright red tongue.
- Slobbering.
- Sticky saliva.
- Depression.
- Weakness.
- Reluctance to move.
- Convulsions.



If you notice any of these symptoms in your small pet you should move them into the shade, lower its temperature by wetting its ears and seek the advice of your vet immediately.

There are several ways in which you can make sure your pet is comfortable:



**WATER** - you should keep a close eye on your pet's water levels as part of their everyday care. However, this is even MORE important during spells of hot and humid weather. Water is at risk of evaporating in warmer weather so topping up more regularly will be essential. A good supply of water helps your pet to regulate its fluid balance and keep it refreshed. The water should be easily accessible and secure enough so that it cannot be overturned by your pet. Ice cubes added to the water helps to keep the water cool and slow the speed of evaporation.

Another way to easily hydrate a small animal is to feed them foods with a high water content. Fruits and vegetables such as cucumber, lettuce, radish, apples, berries, cherries, melon, grapes, strawberries, watercress, celery leaves and fresh spinach are all good food-related sources of water and hydration. **TAKE CARE;** do not feed too much fruit to certain small animals as the sugar can cause health problems.

**ENVIRONMENT** - you should be aware of where you locate your pet's cage or hutch. As already stated, your pet would have no option but to remain in a spot which may be too hot or harmful to them. You should try to keep your pet's home away from windows, out of direct sunlight and in an area which doesn't get too hot throughout the day. Also be aware of the changes a location can experience throughout the day as the sun moves across the sky. A spot that is cool first thing in the morning can become a sun trap in the afternoon.



Small pets shouldn't be kept in metal hutches or cages during the Summer as they attract heat. A small pet shouldn't be left unattended in a hot car at any time so this is something to consider if you are travelling with them.

It might also not be enough to move your pet's home into the shade when it is very humid AND warm. Read more in "other ways to help keep your small pet cool" later in this leaflet.

It is tempting to use a fan or air-conditioning to cool down your pet. However, this isn't a good solution as prolonged exposure to cold air may leave them vulnerable to ill health, especially when left unattended. In the case of hamsters, if they are kept too cold for too long they may go into hibernation, whilst gerbils and ferrets may go into a lethargic, hibernation-like state. This state is discouraged in captive pets. A fan works for us humans by cooling down our sweat which helps to regulate our temperature. However, small animals don't sweat so this doesn't help them to cool down.



#### **OTHER WAYS TO HELP KEEP YOUR PET COOL**

There are several other ways to help your pet stay cool;

-  place a cooled ceramic tile into your pet's cage for them to rest on.
-  freeze a large bottle of water or two and place them into your pet's cage or hutch to keep the atmosphere cooler.
-  invest in a misting spray or system. Allow for dry areas in the hutch or cage so the small animal can escape the mist when required. It is also important to regularly change your pet's litter and hay to avoid the formation of mould and to ward off flies.
-  ventilate your pet's cage or hutch by keeping it off the ground. Placing a few bricks under a small pet's habitat will allow for a breeze to circulate under and through their home.
-  regularly groom your pet and trim the hair of long-haired rabbits and guinea pigs. This helps to keep them cool in warmer temperatures.



#### **OTHER ISSUES TO LOOK OUT FOR**

## **Fly strike**

is more common in the Summer months because of the increase in fly activity, possible diarrhoea from an increase in high water content foods such as fruit and a dirty cage or hutch and humid atmosphere. It is important that you check your pet

regularly for signs of this potentially fatal condition.

It is caused by green bottle flies and other related fly species, laying eggs on small animals (mainly rabbits). The flies are attracted to damp fur, urine, faeces and the odour of the animal. The fly lays their eggs on the animal and the maggots which hatch from the eggs eat the flesh of the small animal as well as release dangerous toxins.

Animals which have a wet or dirty groin are most at risk, particularly those who are unable to clean themselves properly. If you do see maggots on your pet's fur you should seek veterinary attention immediately.

