

POCKET PETS MANUAL

4-H Special Interest Series

By:

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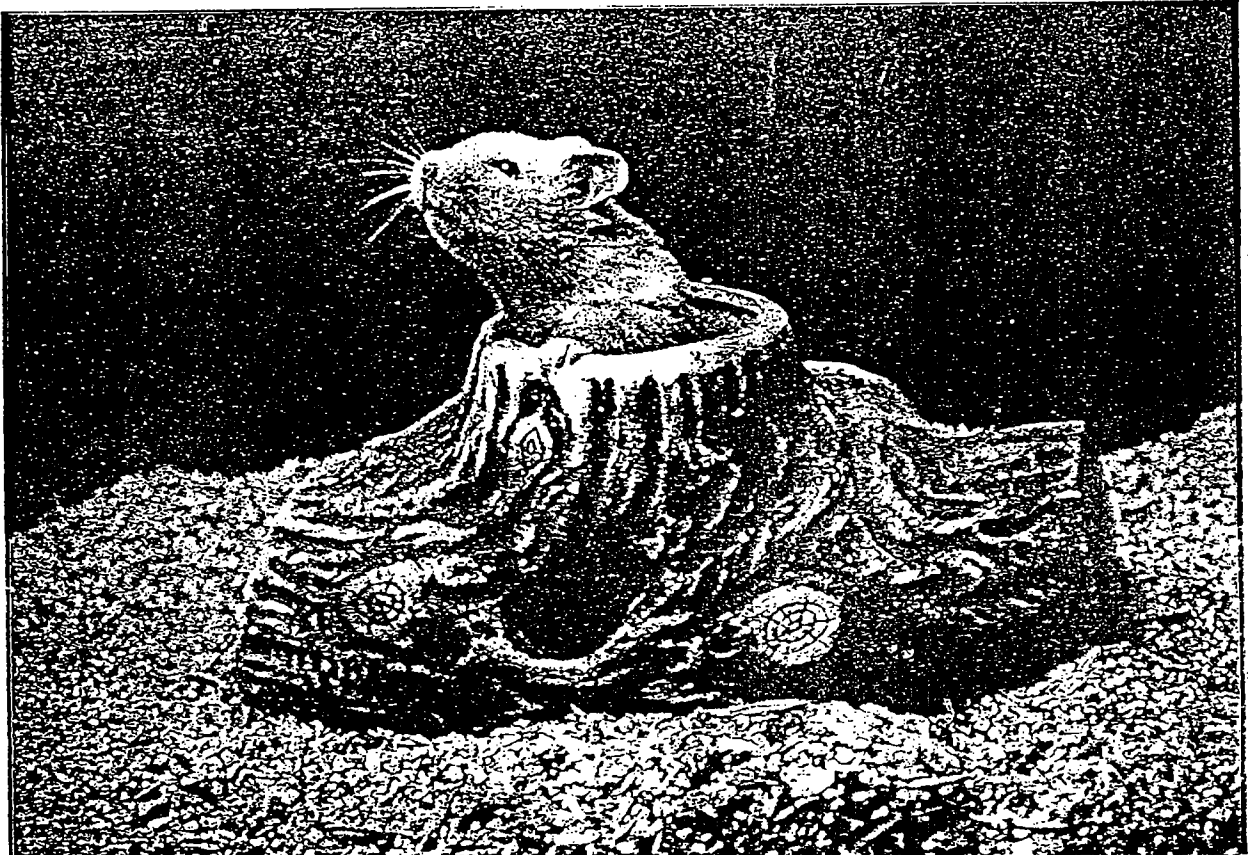


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MICE AND RATS
(Lesson 2)

A. Objectives.

1. To expose members to a brief history of the mouse and rat.
2. To teach members how to house, feed, handle, and groom mice and rats.
3. To teach about mouse and rat health care.

B. Introduction.

1. Ask such questions as how many members have watched wild or tame mice or rats and what they thought of them.
2. Ask members how they think one should care for mice and rats.

C. The history of mice and rats.

1. Mice and rats are rodents. They are hardy, fertile, and easy to raise. They flourish where man does.
2. Their history goes back to 4000 B.C. They have appeared in religious ceremonies and folk tales in Asia, North Africa, Germany, China and Japan.
3. Wild mice and rats are pests.
 - a. They destroy food.
 - b. They carry dangerous diseases to other animals and to man.
 - c. They cannot be domesticated.
4. Domesticated mice and rats are valuable to man.
 - a. They are used in all kinds of psychological, biological, medical, and nutritional studies.
 - b. Through this function, they help man combat diseases such as cancer.
5. Good qualities of tame mice and rats.
 - a. They are friendly and curious.
 - b. They are intelligent and affectionate.
 - c. They make good pets.

D. Housing for mice and rats.

1. Mice or rats should be kept in a good-sized wire or metal cage. They will gnaw through a wooden one.

2. If the cage has a raised wire floor, provide a solid upper platform as a place for the pet to rest and connect both platforms with a ramp or ladder.
3. If the cage has a solid metal floor, line it with sawdust, wood shavings, or commercial litter.
 - a. Clean out and disinfect the bottom of the cage every other day and scatter fresh litter on it.
 - b. For a good deoderant, mix one teaspoonful of eucalyptus (purchased at a drug store) in a cup of water and sprinkle a few drops of the solution daily on the cage floor.
4. Furnish the cage with branches, swings, perches, and an exercise wheel.
5. Furnish a nest box.
 - a. Use an empty cottage cheese carton for mice.
 - b. Use an empty cereal box for rats.
 - c. Furnish absorbant cotton or shredded paper (with no printing on it. Printing ink can sicken a mouse or rat.) for nest material.

E. Feeding mice and rats.

1. Mice and rats eat about the same food.
2. Feed them a basic diet of dry dog food and water.
3. Vary this diet by giving them whole grains (corn, wheat, oats, and soy beans), potatoes, apples, and leafy vegetables.
4. Provide a piece of wood to help keep their teeth in good condition, or put several hard-shelled nuts or a beef bone into the cage.
5. Supply fresh water daily in a gravity flow bottle. (This can be purchased at a pet shop.)

F. Handling mice and rats.

1. Obtain a mouse or rat for a pet when it is about one month old or just weaned. It is easier to tame at that age.
2. The fastest way to tame it is to feed it from your hand or fingers.
3. Pick a mouse or rat up by the tail.
 - a. This does not hurt it.
 - b. Do not pick it up by the tip of the tail, as the skin may pull off in your fingers.
4. Place the animal in your hand and stroke its head and back gently.
5. Never hold the animal too tightly.

G. Grooming mice and rats.

1. Keep mice and rats under sanitary conditions.
2. They will keep themselves clean and well-groomed.

H. Health care.

1. Keep pets clean and dry.
2. Isolate any pet that looks or acts sick.
3. If a mouse or rat has fleas or lice, dust it with an insecticide powder that is recommended for cats, and disinfect the cage.
4. Keep food dishes fastened to the side of the cage and well above the floor to prevent contamination of food by urine or feces. The dish should be small enough so the animal cannot sleep in it.

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GERBILS
(Lesson 3)

A. Objectives.

1. To give members the history and basic characteristics of gerbils.
2. To teach members how to house, feed, handle, and groom gerbils.
3. To teach about gerbil health care.

B. Introduction.

1. Ask any member who has seen a gerbil to describe it.
2. Ask members how they think one should care for gerbils.

C. The history and characteristics of gerbils.

1. Gerbils are originally from the deserts and sandy wastes of Asia and Africa.
2. They are fast becoming one of the most popular "pocket pets".
3. They were introduced to the United States in 1954 for medical research.
4. They are still used, like mice and rats, in research.
5. Characteristics of gerbils.
 - a. They are mammals.
 - b. They, unlike most rodents, are diurnal: They sleep at night and are awake during the day.
 - c. The adult is about four inches long; its tail is another four inches.
 - d. They weigh about three ounces.
 - e. Their fur is dark brown on their backs, light gray underneath.
 - f. Their tails have fur.

D. Housing for gerbils.

1. Gerbils should be kept in a cage.
 - a. An aquarium (three to fifteen gallon size) makes a good home. Leaking aquariums may be purchased at a moderate cost.
 - b. Metal or heavy wooden cages may be used.
 - c. Keep the cage covered with a metal or hardware cloth lid.

2. Cover the bottom of the cage with absorbent material: cedar chips, sawdust, or commercial litter.
3. Place a piece of burlap sack in the cage for gerbils to chew up and nest in.
4. Clean the cage about once a month.
5. Add a small amount of additional litter weekly.
6. Keep the cage dry and in temperatures between 50 and 80 degrees.

E. Feeding gerbils.

1. Gerbils live on grains, seeds, roots, and grasses.
2. Feed the gerbil sunflower seeds, corn, ~~oats~~, wheat, watermelon seeds, bits of apple, and fresh grass. Dry dog food is also good.
3. Feed each gerbil about one tablespoon of food a day.
4. Gerbils will not overeat, but overfeeding is wasteful and may lead to illness if the gerbil stores his food and it spoils.
5. Feed only once a day.
6. Provide fresh water in a gravity bottle dispenser. The gerbil drinks very little.

F. Handling gerbils.

1. Gerbils are shy but curious.
2. Handle them gently and frequently to make them relaxed friends.
3. They enjoy having their back and ears gently scratched.
4. Pick up a gerbil by grasping its tail close to the body then hold it gently but firmly with your hand around his entire body.

G. Grooming gerbils.

1. Keep the gerbil's home clean and dry.
2. The gerbil will groom and clean itself.

H. Health care.

1. Gerbils are very free of diseases.
2. Give the gerbil a balanced diet.
3. Protect him from extremely cold temperatures.
4. Provide him with shade if he is in direct sunlight.
5. Keep a block of wood in the cage on which he can gnaw to wear his teeth down. Otherwise, the teeth may grow too long and hinder chewing.
6. Keep pets clean and dry.
7. Isolate any pet that looks or acts sick.
8. If the gerbil has fleas or lice, dust it with an insecticide powder recommended for cats, and disinfect the cage.

NOTE: Wild gerbils can cause heavy damage to crops. Do not take gerbils as pets to Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, or California. The gerbils could escape and multiply rapidly.

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GUINEA PIGS
(Lesson 4)

A. Objectives.

1. To give members the history and basic characteristics of guinea pigs.
2. To teach members about the housing, feeding, and handling of guinea pigs.
3. To teach basic health care of guinea pigs.

B. Introduction.

1. Ask members to describe guinea pigs.
2. Ask members how they think one should care for guinea pigs.

C. The history and characteristics of guinea pigs.

1. Guinea pigs have been used in laboratory work for almost 100 years.
2. They are used in disease, drug, and nutrition studies.
3. They are very popular as pets throughout the world.
4. They are not related to pigs; they were called pigs because of their grunts and squeals. When they were introduced into England from South America (where they originated), they were sold for a guinea (an old English coin). Thus, they became known as guinea pigs.
5. Characteristics of guinea pigs:
 - a. They are rodents with short, stocky bodies, short legs, and no tail.
 - b. They like to be handled and petted.
 - c. They are clean, with no particularly offensive odor.
 - d. There are three recognized breeds:
 - (1) The American Cavy
 - (a) Best known and most widely raised.
 - (b) Coat is short-haired and smooth.
 - (c) Most common color is white
 - (2) The Abyssinian Cavy
 - (a) Body type and standard weight are the same as the American Cavy.
 - (b) Coat is short, harsh, and wiry.
 - (c) Stiff, erect hairs grow across the shoulders and hind quarters.
 - (3) The Peruvian Cavy
 - (a) Body type and standard weight are the same as the American Cavy.
 - (b) Coat is long, silky, and very dense.

(c) These are rarely used in research.

(d) Requires daily brushing.

D. Housing for guinea pigs.

1. Guinea pigs must be protected from extreme heat and from cold. They do not thrive at temperatures below 65 degrees.
2. Pens do not have to be elaborate, as guinea pigs usually do not jump or climb.
3. Pens should keep guinea pig protected from other animals.
4. Most pens have a screen wire or hardware cloth across the top.
5. A wooden box 24 inches x 12 inches x 12 inches high, with a wire floor and covering can be used.
 - a. Half the floor should be solid so the animal can rest.
 - b. Each animal requires a minimum of one square foot of floor space.
6. If a solid floor is used, cover it with wood shavings, sawdust, straw, or commercial litter.

E. Feeding guinea pigs.

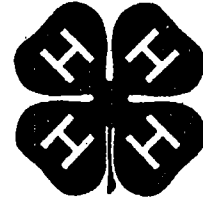
1. The guinea pig is a strict vegetarian.
2. Feed him a variety of fruits and vegetables: alfalfa, apples, carrots, green corn, dandelions, lettuce, cauliflower, clover, lawn clippings, spinach, and tomatoes.
3. Always remove and throw away fruit and vegetables left at the end of the day.
4. Attach a food cup to the side of the cage and keep food pellets for guinea pigs in the dish.
5. Provide fresh water in a gravity bottle dispenser. The guinea pig will usually drink very little water.
6. Keep a salt spool in the cage. These can be purchased at pet stores.

F. Handling guinea pigs.

1. To pick up a guinea pig, grasp him with the thumb and forefinger just behind the head, and in front of the forelegs.
2. The remaining fingers should hold him gently but firmly behind the front legs and around the rib cage.
3. As the animal is lifted, the free hand should be placed under the rump of the pig to give support.
4. Pet the guinea pig as much as possible.

G. Health Care.

1. Guinea pigs are very healthy and will remain healthy when properly housed and fed.
2. Prevent wild mice and rats from gaining access to the pig's home or feed. They may carry paratyphoid.
3. Clean and disinfect cage and equipment at least once a week.
4. Keep the area around the pen clean and neat.
5. Feed a balanced diet of dry and green foods.
6. Remove all uneaten green food.
7. Provide clean, fresh water.
8. Provide adequate light and ventilation. Keep the animal away from drafts.
9. Keep other animals away.
10. If the guinea pig has fleas or lice, dust it with an insecticide powder recommended for cats, and disinfect the cage.



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HAMSTERS
(Lesson 5)

- A. Objectives.
1. To give members the history and basic characteristics of hamsters.
 2. To teach members about the housing, feeding, and handling of hamsters.
 3. To teach basic health care of hamsters.
- B. Introduction.
1. Ask members who have seen hamsters to describe them.
 2. Ask members how they think one should care for hamsters.
- C. The history and characteristics of hamsters.
1. Hamsters were first found in Syria in 1930 by Professor Aronin, a scientist from Hebrew University.
 2. Professor Aronin brought 12 baby hamsters back to Israel. Three survived and continued to breed.
 3. All hamsters now used as pets or laboratory animals come from these hamsters.
 4. Characteristics of hamsters.
 - a. They are rodents, about six inches long, with short stubby tails and well-developed cheek pouches in which they transport food.
 - b. They are reddish gold in color, with the stomach area of the body nearly white, and with black markings on the head and cheeks. Eyes are black.
 - c. In their native habitat they burrow in the ground and make a main tunnel with numerous side chambers in which food is stored.
 - d. They may cause heavy crop damage, so precautions should be taken not to let them escape.
 - e. In choosing a hamster, select one between five and eight weeks old. It should have soft, silken fur, a plump body, and prominent, bright eyes.
 - f. Males have a slightly better temperament; thus they make better pets.
 - g. Hamsters prefer living alone, except when mating.

D. Housing for hamsters.

1. Hamsters should be kept in a building with a temperature between 55 and 80 degrees.
2. Hamsters should be kept in metal cages, or in wooden cages protected on the inside with hardware cloth to prevent animals from gnawing through.
3. A cage 12 inches wide, 15 inches long, and 12 inches high will comfortably house one hamster.
4. Line the bottom of the cage with ~~about~~one inch of sawdust, wood shavings. Commercial litter, or other absorbant material.
5. Clean and disinfect the cage once a week. Be sure the cage is dry before you put the hamster back in it.
6. Install an exercise wheel in the cage.
7. Keep the cage out of drafts and away from direct sunlight.

E. Feeding hamsters.

1. Feed hamsters a diet of corn, oats, or wheat mixed with prepared dog food.
2. Prepared hamster food (purchased at a pet store) is also satisfactory.
3. An adult hamster requires about a half ounce of food each day.
4. Feed hamsters small amounts of lettuce, carrots, celery, and other vegetables and fruits in addition to dry foods. Do not feed citrus fruits, as it may upset a hamster's stomach.
5. Always remove and throw away any green vegetables left at the end of the day.
6. Provide plenty of fresh water in a gravity bottle.

F. Handling hamsters.

1. Handle your hamster frequently.
2. To tame your hamster, quietly stroke his back without trying to pick him up. When he gets used to your touch, gently slide your hand under his body and lift him. Hold him firmly in your hand and offer him something to eat.
3. Always handle hamsters gently.
4. Never tease or frighten hamsters.

G. Health Care.

1. Clean and disinfect cage and equipment at least once a week.
2. Be sure cage is dry after cleaning.
3. Keep hamsters away from drafts.
4. Feed a balanced diet of dry and green food.
5. Remove all uneaten green food.
6. Provide clean, fresh water.
7. Provide adequate light and ventilation.
8. Always check for parasites, such as lice and fleas; if found, treat the hamster with an insecticide used on cats.

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BREEDING POCKET PETS
(Lesson 6)

- A. Objectives.
1. To give members the information necessary to breed gerbils, guinea pigs, hamsters, mice and rats.
 2. To help members understand the responsibilities and rewards of breeding animals.
- B. Introduction.
1. Ask such questions as: Would you like to breed your pets? What responsibilities would you have if you bred your pets? What would you like about having baby pets? What additional problems would you have if you bred your pets?
 2. Promote a discussion on the problems of pocket pet overpopulation. Discuss such things as danger to crops and cruelty to the animals. Include the fact that animals may die if they are turned out in a climate incompatible with their life system; also discuss the danger of increasing the rodent population in terms of diseases transmissible to man.
 3. Discuss possible ways to dispose of excess pocket pets (giving them to pet shops; giving them to research laboratories).
- C. Breeding rats and mice.
1. A female mouse is ready to breed at 8 to 10 weeks; a female rat at 10 weeks to 3 months.
 2. The gestation period is about 21 days for both rats and mice.
 3. The average litter is 6 - 10 babies.
 4. Mice and rats are good mothers; no additional care is needed for the babies.
 5. The female rat's mate may be left with her during pregnancy and nursing, but she will not accept other females in the cage. Pregnant and nursing female mice may be kept together, but it is advisable to remove the males from the cage.
 6. As the babies approach maturity, the sexes must be separated or the animals will multiply very rapidly.
- D. Breeding gerbils.
1. The gerbil is monogamous; he desires only one mate.
 2. The gestation period for gerbils is 24 to 25 days.
 3. The average litter is about 5 babies.
 4. Both parents can stay with the litter.
 5. Babies begin to take solid food at 3 weeks and are weaned by the sixth week.

6. Do not touch the babies until their eyes are open (about 3 weeks). The mother is very protective and, if frightened in the first few weeks, she may kill and eat her young.
 7. Gerbils are ready to breed at 3 months.
- E. Breeding guinea pigs.
1. Litters average from one to four babies.
 2. Feed the mother some milk and bread during the first 10 days after birth. Do not let the milk sour.
 3. Do not let a guinea pig have more than 4 to 5 litters a year.
 4. The gestation period is between 59 to 67 days.
 5. The sow (female guinea pig) will mate within a few hours after bearing a litter. If not then, she will not mate until the young are weaned. If you do not want another litter, remove the male from the pen.
 6. After the young are a day old, they may be handled and petted with care. They begin to eat solid food after the first few days.
 7. Wean the young at 3 to 4 weeks. At the same time, separate males from females, as they can breed at a very early age.
 8. Do not breed females until they are 3 to 5 months old; do not breed them (if they have not been bred before) after 6 months of age.
 9. Do not handle a sow during the last 2 weeks of pregnancy.
- F. Breeding hamsters.
1. Females may be bred when they are 8 weeks old.
 2. The gestation period is 16 days. Hamsters are very prolific. Keep males and females apart unless you are sure you can find a place for the young.
 3. To mate hamsters:
 - a. Place the male in the female's cage and the female in the male's cage. This will get them used to each other's scent.
 - b. Return them to their own cages for several days. Place cages close together so the animals will see each other.
 - c. One evening place the female into the male cage.
 - d. Mating should follow and the female should be removed after an hour or two.
 - e. If the pair fights, remove the female and try again the next evening, until mating occurs.
 - f. If mating does not occur at the first meeting, but the animals seem to accept each other peacefully, they can be left together up to a week. At the end of that time, return the female to her cage.
 4. The average litter is 7.
 5. Do not handle the female much after the 12th day of pregnancy.
 6. Supplement the female's diet with bread and milk.
 7. The female will build her own nest. Give her scraps of cloth, tissues, paper or cotton to line her nest.
 8. Do not handle or disturb the mother for several days after the babies are born. Do not even look in the nest. This may frighten the mother, and she may kill her young.
 9. After the first 9 days, you may resume cleaning the cage and caring for the hamster.
 10. Babies can be weaned at 3 to 4 weeks.

