

Feeding Enrichment for Small Mammals

Is 'how' you feed as important as 'what' you feed?

Choosing the right food for your pet is an important element of pet care. However, not only what you feed but how you feed can have a significant impact on their wellbeing.



In the wild, small mammals would spend most of their time searching for, storing, and eating enough of their food which gives them the energy and nutrients that they need. You can encourage these natural behaviours in your pets by creating the right environment to help them stay active and stimulated by working for their food reward. While playing and exercise can help reduce boredom and stress in pets, feeding time is also a great opportunity for physical and mental activities and improving your pet's quality of life.

General benefits of feeding enrichment for small mammals

- Prolonging the feeding time which reduces boredom.
- Creating stimulating challenges to make them work and achieve rewards.
- Encouraging natural behaviour such as foraging, digging and stretching.
- May help prevent obesity by keeping pets active.
- Dental health benefits by helping to wear down teeth (for those pets with constantly growing teeth).
- Useful for training purposes and bonding between owner and pet.



RABBITS AND GUINEA PIGS

Herbivorous small mammals such as rabbits and guinea pigs enjoy foraging. So, putting their food in different locations will allow them to express this natural behaviour and will prolong their feeding time, keeping them active for longer.



You could place some of their food in hanging positions to make them stand on their hind legs and stretch their muscles to reach the food. Also try stuffing a cardboard tube with hay, herbs, or suitable vegetables for your pets to get the food out of.



The majority of the diet of **Rabbits** and **Guinea pigs** should consist of **good quality hay or grass**. Click on these images to view our posters on this topic.



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HAMSTERS, GERBILS, MICE & RATS

Try using more than one location at a time to place their food. You can also hide some of their food, or treats like suitable vegetables, inside paper bags or cardboard boxes for them to shred and discover their rewards!



In the wild these animals dig burrows, which are a series of tunnels, to live, breed, and store their food. To encourage these natural digging and storing behaviours, you can provide ready-made tunnels, or let them make their own. Blocks of wood can be drilled to make tunnels, which the animals may enlarge themselves by their natural tendency to gnaw.

FERRETS

Ferrets enjoy solving puzzles and searching for their food so you can hide some of their food around their enclosure to stimulate this behaviour. Some dog toys and treat dispensers can be used for feeding enrichment for ferrets too!



A suitable small animal activity toy can be filled with treats or ferret kibbles to give them a challenge. Ferrets also love to chase things, so you can attach a treat to a string (or a cat teaser toy) to encourage their natural hunting behaviour.

Please Note:

- Only give treats and toys that are safe for your pet's species and size.
- Consult the pet food or toy manufacturer if you are not sure about a product.
- Treats should form no more than 10% of their daily calorie intake.
- Uneaten fresh food should be removed after a few hours to prevent spoilage.
- Fresh drinking water should always be available for pets.
- Consult your vet if you have any concerns over the health of your pet.



FACT SHEET

Can't All Small Mammals Eat the Same Food?

In the wild small mammals live in different climates and naturally eat different foods. In fact, food suitable for one species can be totally unsuitable for another. They also have different nutritional needs with some of them only feeding on plants and others relying on animal proteins in their diet. So it is important for pet owners to get reliable nutritional advice, specific to their pet type. It provides them with a balanced diet, links specialist pet food retailers, manufacturers and what animal nutritionists are best placed to provide tips on what to feed your pet. For all pets, remember to clear away and replace any unclean food on a daily basis to prevent spoilage. Introducing new foods, is best to do gradually.

Hamsters
Hamsters such as rabbits, guinea pigs, chinchillas and cichlids are omnivores that only eat grass and plant based food. All herbivores need a constant and steady supply of good quality fresh hay and/or grass on a daily basis. In fact this is an essential part of their diet to keep their digestive systems and teeth healthy. Check out our poster for more information and as a handy reminder of the importance of this.

Guinea pigs
These animals that eat a variety of food sources including both plant-based and animal-based foods are called omnivores. Examples of omnivorous small pets are hamsters, gerbils, mice and rats. In their natural habitat they eat grass, seeds, grains and insects. Although there are other omnivores as herbivores, they are omnivores and will thrive on a variety of plant and animal-based nutrients in their diet. Complete pet foods, specifically designed to help keep omnivorous health, are available. Small amounts of suitable fresh fruit and vegetables can also be provided.

How important is water?
Drinking water is incredibly important and a constant supply of clean fresh water should always be available by your pet. Specially designed bottles with metal spouts are a good option but some animals prefer to drink from a water bowl. So why not try offering your pet both and see which they prefer. Any water spillage should be cleaned up so that your pet's bedding stays clean and dry.

Water Drinking Always Available

There is a PET OUT THERE FOR YOU!
With the right care, small pets make great companions for children and adults alike. Do your research to see what different pets need and which pet type could suit you and your lifestyle best. Think about your home environment, your family members and how much time and resources you have for your new pet. PFMA's Pet Care page is a great place to start or further research into the exciting world of small pets.

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Rabbit Size-0-Meter

Size-0-Meter Score: Characteristics:

1 Very Thin	• Hip bones, ribs and spine are very sharp to the touch
2 Thin	• Hip bones, ribs and spine are easily felt
3 Ideal	• Hip bones, ribs and spine easily felt but not rounded, not easily - ribs feel like a packed ball of grass
4 Overweight	• Presence is needed to feel the ribs, spine and hip bones
5 Obese	• Very hard to feel the spine and hip bones - ribs can't be felt

Checklist:
 Your pet is a healthy weight
 Check advice about your pet's weight
 Check advice on your pet could be at risk

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Guinea pig Size-0-Meter

Size-0-Meter Score: Characteristics:

1 Very Thin	• Ribs are difficult to see but feel easily. Spine and spine are prominent and prominent and can be felt with the hip bones touch. Clear abdominal curve can be seen. Gull signers hairless.
2 Thin	• Ribs are easily felt but not prominent. Spine and spine are easily felt with the pressure. Lines of an abdominal curve can be seen.
3 Ideal	• Ribs are not prominent and cannot be felt individually. Hip and spine are not prominent but can be felt. No abdominal curve. Clear narrower than ideal size.
4 Overweight	• Ribs are harder to distinguish. Hips and spine difficult to feel. Not well shaped ribcage.
5 Obese	• Ribs, hips and spine cannot be felt or can with mild pressure. No body shape can be distinguished. Obese guinea pig. Spine above Guinea pig's ribcage standing position. Not clear to be seen.

Checklist:
 Your pet is a healthy weight
 Check advice about your pet's weight
 Check advice on your pet could be at risk

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Learn more about small mammals!
Can't All Small Mammals Eat the Same Food? Find out from this factsheet. Check out these body condition score charts for **Rabbits** and **Guinea pigs**.

