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Hopefully by now we are all getting over the excesses of the Christmas period. People always joke that health clubs get you to join in January when the memory of your new year's "get fit" resolution is fresh in your mind. Well your pet may need the same attention, and it could help you too.

An overweight pet is far more likely to have long term health problems. If you think your pet is a little more "cuddly" than usual the first thing you should do is call your vet for a thorough examination to check for medical conditions that may be causing the weight gain. In the majority of cases of weight gain there are usually no underlying medical causes. In these cases you should ask your vet about weight clinics. Most surgeries run them and they are often organised by the nurses for relatively little cost. These clinics will be able to advise you on diets and will be able to help and support you in monitoring and managing your pet's weight.

Most pets are naturally active but over the winter months their activity will fall and they can gain weight. I haven't room to cover every animal but here are a few.

**Dogs.** This is really a book in itself, suffice to say a daily walk is the best idea; it benefits both pet and owner. In essence your dog's weight reflects the balance between daily intake of calories versus calories burnt by exercise. The more you exercise the more you can eat, or the way I look at it, a game of squash buys a pint of beer!



**Cats.** Cats are natural hunters and many cats are only seen once or twice a day by their owners as the rest of the time they are out and about, although it is quite possible they are asleep outdoors somewhere. If they are active young cats then they are probably getting enough by just being an outdoor cat. Indoor cats are a different matter. The cat that loves nothing more than to sit on the chair or windowsill all day watching the world go by is far more likely to suffer from increased weight gain. The simple answer is regular play. Cats are naturally curious animals and small fast-moving objects will cause the innate chase response right from when they are kittens. Most mature cats will continue to show it, particularly when they have practiced it all their lives. Try rolling small balls such as one of those practice golf balls which have holes in, or even easier, a scrunched up piece of paper tied to piece of string and pulled erratically will get their interest. Some people even tie these objects onto fishing lines and poles so that the game can take place over a larger area without the cat seeing them do it! Furry, feathery or flapping things are particularly attractive to cats, but with kittens especially, replace such toys as they start to get damaged in case parts get swallowed. Patches of bright light, such as the reflection from a watch face or mirror, often get cats chasing.



**Hamsters.** Hamsters are solitary animals they should live by themselves in their own little home, but you should try to give your hamster the biggest cage you can afford and have room for in your own house. Usually, a proper sized hamster cage is at least one foot square in size, but like I said, if you can get a bigger one your hamster will really benefit you from it! You should only keep one hamster per cage, otherwise they may fight and seriously hurt each other. Dwarf hamsters tend to be more sociable, but it is still a good idea to only keep one per cage unless they have been reared together.



Remember your hamster is a nocturnal animal, this means it will be active at night but not during the day. Apart from a running wheel that most hamster cages will come with, there

are many other wooden toys that are especially designed for hamsters. Most of these have a few holes so that the animal can play hide and seek, or duck inside. In addition, hamsters enjoy gnawing on wooden toys since it is a way to sharpen their teeth. These toys should be chemical-free, chewable and digestible.



In the wild, hamsters can run long distances each night, so you should make sure to include a hamster exercise wheel because it will provide your hamster with hours of fun and also keep it fit. I think the wire wheels are unsafe for all rodents as legs or tails can get caught in the wire while the wheel is turning, causing injuries. Hamsters are notorious escape artists, so you need to make sure whichever hamster cage you decide to buy is secure. Hamsters like to dig tunnels and can manoeuvre through small spaces to escape.

**Gerbils.** Gerbils are fantastic and incredibly friendly pets. They can be taught to climb up your shoulder and can sit there, or on your head! Their homes take up little space, they are low-maintenance and don't smell. Gerbils are highly social and unlike the hamster do not like being alone at all. If you're getting gerbils, get at least two as it is thought that lone gerbils live shorter, less healthy lives, and are often overweight and not too happy



Gerbils are VERY active animals, and they need an entertaining environment. Let your imagination be your guide. A similar cage to that of a hamster is ideal and again some toys in the cage will make all the difference to your gerbil's fitness and happiness. Perhaps every time you finish off a roll of toilet paper add it to their play area. They will probably run in and out of the tube before settling down to a good gnaw. They love it, but within a few hours it will be shredded. Some gerbils love their wheel, and play in it for hours! Others are will have nothing to do with the wheel.

**Rabbits.** Rabbits can be good pets and nowadays are the third most widely kept small animal. However many people continue to keep their pet in a small hutch, perhaps sited at the bottom of the garden. Such rabbits live a miserable existence in cramped and uncomfortable conditions, with no area provided for exercise. Poor housing is one of the main reasons for ill health in rabbits. Rabbits need to be outside for a while every day. They need sunlight to produce vitamin D. Whatever the size of the hutch, rabbits need exercise and the safest way to achieve this is by using a run. However, the run must be escape- and predator- proof and provide shelter. The run should be moved daily so that the rabbit has fresh grass to nibble. Make sure that the grass has not been treated with weed-killer or any other harmful substance. The run should only be used for day time exercise and the rabbit placed back into its hutch at night. Ensure that other pets are not able to frighten the rabbit. Cats appear to love to use runs as a resting place and are greatly entertained by the stress of the occupant.



The benefits of pet ownership have been known for a long time so let's look after them as well. As for me – I am well on the way to thinking about starting training for the Taunton Triathlon in the middle of May (or at least I have eased up on eating all the cakes and chocolates that our clients were so kind to give the practice at Christmas)

Coming soon..... Blake Veterinary Group in March will launch a pet health plan to help spread the cost of preventative treatments.