Small Animal Nutrition

By Bridgette Kolias, The Humane Society for Seattle/King County

Nutrition is defined as the steps by which a living organism consumes food and uses it for growth and development. It is extremely important that proper nutrition is provided for your small animal. Nutrition has a direct effect on the health, longevity, appearance and happiness of your small pet. Each type of small animal has specific nutritional requirements. Make sure that you are willing to provide these specialized diets and that you are financially able to continue proper nutrition throughout your pet’s life. Most small animals will fall into one of two groups. The first group is called herbivores. Herbivores are animals that eat only vegetable matter; they consume no meat products. The second group is called omnivores. These animals eat both meat and vegetable matter.

Providing Fresh Food and Water

All small animals must receive fresh food and water on a daily basis. All uneaten vegetable matter and meat should be removed immediately. Food should always be provided in heavy ceramic dishes or secure hanging feeders. Many small animals enjoy sitting in their food dishes while they nibble and heavy food dishes will help avoid spills. Water may be provided in a water bottle securely attached to the cage or in a heavy crock. Water bottles are generally preferred because you will experience less contamination and spills. Make sure that all water bottles are hung at an appropriate height so that drinking is made easy. Make sure that water is flowing freely and that the water tube is not blocked in any way. Also make sure that the bottle does not leak.

Keeping Things Clean

It is extremely important to disinfect both food and water containers on a daily basis; you want to avoid any buildup of bacteria or algae. You may clean food and water dishes with soap and water, but make sure that all soap remnants are completely rinsed away. Distilled white vinegar is also a great cleaning agent.

Avoiding Dangerous Foods

In addition to providing your small animal with a diet that is nutritionally sound you must also provide a diet that is safe. There are several food and plant items that could be fatal to your small animal. Some examples include: apple seeds, avocado, coffee, eggplant, tomato stems/leaves, and walnuts. In addition to food and plant items always keep in mind the dangers of household cleaners, insecticides and lawn chemicals.