

## **Responding to Disasters Involving Pocket Pets**

Increasing popularity of pocket pets such as mice, rats, hamsters, guinea pigs, and rabbits makes it likely that such animals would be displaced in an emergency. The following are basic principles to follow during emergency situations.

### **Handling**

In general pocket pets are not aggressive. However, they may bite if attempts are made to grasp or restrain them around the body. Gentle handling is imperative for the safety of the animal and the handler.

The small size of many pocket pets necessitates gentle handling. Small rodents can be held by the base (not the tip) of the tail. Alternatively, such animals or animals without tails, such as hamsters, can be scooped up with a small coffee can for transport.

Rabbits and guinea pigs should be held by supporting the rear quarters with one hand or arm and the front part of the body with the other arm. The front part of the rabbit's body can be held by grasping the nape of the neck. Never hold a rabbit by the ears. The rear quarters must always be supported.

### **Temporary Housing**

Housing of these species is quite simple. Housing quarters should be large enough so that the animal can turn around and make normal postural adjustments. In addition, the cage should be escape proof. Hamsters are adept at pushing open cage lids, so cage covers should have a tight latch or be weighted with a heavy object to prevent escape. Mice and small rats can squeeze through surprisingly small openings; thus ideal cages have no openings except for air flow and are made of clear material to permit quick inspection of the animals.

It is generally safe to house members of the same species together. However, housing of different species in the same cage should be avoided. These species often fight violently when first introduced to new individuals. Thus attention should be paid to aggression, and individuals observed fighting should be separated. These species should not be housed in the presence of natural predators such as cats and dogs.

Cages should contain abundant bedding material. This permits absorption of waste material and helps the animal maintain body temperature.

### **Feeding**

Many of the rodents will eat almost anything that humans will eat. In an emergency, even a piece of bread or a few crackers will suffice for rats and mice. All these species will, in general, readily consume fruit, vegetables, or bird seed. In particular, broccoli, apples, cabbage, and alfalfa are readily consumed by most. Guinea pigs must have vitamin C included in the diet. Thus they should be supplied with citrus fruit or parsley or kale.

Water is critical for small mammals. Mice can die of water deprivation within 24 hours. Water can be offered on the bottom of the cage in a small crock; however, these animals often fill water dishes with bedding or food, thereby making the water unavailable. It is better to provide water via a water bottle and tube attached to the cage. Remember not to fill the water bottle to the top, since an air-lock will be created and the animal will be unable to sip from the bottle. Instead, leave a small space of air in the water bottle. Alternatively, animals can be provided food items with a high water content, such as sliced potatoes or apples daily.

(Modified from Dr. M. Suckow, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, Laboratory Animal Care Program).