



CAN'T ALL SMALL MAMMALS EAT THE SAME FOOD?

The PFMA's Nicole Paley explains the difference between small mammal nutritional needs

Small animals, such as rabbits, guinea pigs and hamsters are an important proportion of the pet population. The pet food industry tends to refer to this group collectively as 'small furrries' but this term encompasses a broad range of species also including ferrets, degus, gerbils, rats and mice. As a result, when speaking to pet owners, it can be tempting to group all these pets together, however, it's very important to clarify that each pet type is different and they have their own distinctive nutritional and behavioural needs. So, in short, no, not 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. As a result, it is important for pet owners to get reliable nutritional advice, specific to their pet type. Vets, specialist pet food retailers, manufacturers and small animal nutritionists are best placed to provide tips on what to feed pets.

HERBIVORES

Herbivores such as rabbits, guinea pigs and chinchillas are animals that only eat grass and plant-based food. All herbivorous small mammals need plenty 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 system and teeth healthy. Check our hay poster for more information and as a handy reminder of the importance of hay.

www.pfma.org.uk/the-importance-of-hay-poster

Alongside their daily portion of good quality hay, which as a general rule should be a serving around the same size as their body, they should also be fed a portion of species-specific pet food. When fed alongside hay and/or grass, a product designed for their species will ensure they are getting all of the vitamins and minerals they need.

A small handful of suitable fresh herbs or leafy green vegetables can also be

Examples of omnivorous small pets are hamsters, gerbils, mice and rats. In their natural habitat they eat grass, seeds, grains and insects. Although they are often mistaken as herbivores, they are omnivores and need a variety of plant and animal-based nutrients in their diet to stay healthy. Complete pet foods, specifically designed to help keep omnivores healthy, are available.

HOW IMPORTANT IS WATER?

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

THERE IS A PET FOR EVERYONE!

With the right care, small pets make great companions for children and adults alike. Encourage owners to do their research to see what different pets need and which pet type suits them and their lifestyle. PFMA's pet care page is a great place to start: www.pfma.org.uk/pet-care. 🐾



given occasionally to provide variety in their diet and behavioural enrichment.

CARNIVORES

Carnivores are animals that eat mainly or exclusively animal-based food. Ferrets, for example, are obligate carnivores which means they need a nutritionally balanced diet containing animal protein to stay fit and healthy and cannot be vegetarians. Complete foods, specifically designed for ferrets, are available. Find out more on our website: www.pfma.org.uk/ferrets

OMNIVORES

Those animals that eat a variety of food sources including both plant-based and animal-based foods are called omnivores.

