Wet Tail in Hamsters

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Wet tail, or Proliferative Ileitis, is one of the most serious intestinal diseases that affect hamsters. Named for the wet, dirty tails that accompany the disease, wet tail is most commonly seen in three to six week old hamsters, but can affect hamsters of any age. All breeds of hamsters are susceptible, but long-haired Teddy Bear hamsters seem more often affected than others.

Cause

Wet tail is caused by fecal to oral contact with the bacteria *Lawsonia intracellularis*. The disease is spread when the hamster comes into contact with food or water contaminated with feces that carry the bacteria.

A contributing factor that makes the hamster more susceptible to the bacteria is stress from a variety of sources, including weaning, recent transport, overcrowded cage conditions, surgery, and rapid dietary changes.

Symptoms

In addition to the soiled, wet area around the anus and tail that gives the disease its common name; there are a variety of other symptoms that you may see.

- Lethargy
- Loss of appetite
- Failure to groom
- Excessively watery diarrhea
- Dehydration
- Dull, sunken eyes
- Irritability
- Hunched posture while sitting or walking
- Abdominal discomfort
- Protruding rectum from constant straining
- Blood in the stool or around the anus in very serious cases

Treatment

If you suspect that your hamster has wet tail, you must schedule a veterinary appointment immediately. Even with treatment, many hamsters will die from this disease, often as quickly as 48 hours from the first signs. Taking immediate action may increase your hamster's chances of survival.

Treatment consists of:

- Antibiotics
- Anti-diarrheal medications
- Subcutaneous and oral fluids to combat dehydration

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In addition to the above treatments prescribed or performed by your veterinarian, you should also keep your hamster warm and clean, isolate him from any other hamsters, and thoroughly sanitize his cage to prevent re-infection or spread of the disease.

Prevention

Unfortunately, there are no steps that you can take to ensure that your hamster absolutely will not develop wet tail. However, there are precautions you can take to protect your hamster and to avoid bringing home an infected hamster.

- Keep your hamster's cage and environment clean by removing soiled bedding from the cage daily and disinfecting the cage weekly.
- Don't stress your new hamster during the period that he is adjusting to his new environment. Limit contact and handling, and keep him on the same food he was eating until he is comfortable in his new home.
- Ask about wet tail before purchasing your hamster from a store or breeder.
- Closely observe the behavior of all the hamsters before picking one out.
- If it appears that one of the hamsters in the cage has wet tail, avoid purchasing another hamster in the same cage.
- Make several trips to the pet store before picking out a hamster to observe cage conditions. If the cage isn't cleaned regularly or if it is overcrowded, your chances of bringing home a sick hamster increase.
- Keep any new hamster separated until his health status has been determined by a veterinarian.

WE RECOMMEND

Oasis Wet-Tail Drops

For diarrhea symptoms in small pets.

DOCTORS FOSTER and SMITH

Aspen Bedding

A combination of absorption power with safe materials to protect your pet.

Clean Cage Spray

neutralizes odors and eliminates debris on cages, habitats, and accessories.

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