

# Small Pet Guide: How to Choose the Healthiest

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Before welcoming a new, furry friend to your home, before shopping, and definitely in advance of any purchase, we recommend that you read extensively to become familiar with your prospective pet's personality traits and care needs. Also, talk to your veterinarian. Explain what kind of pet you desire, and what you want from the pet. He or she will be able to tell you what pets will best meet your expectations and offer tips for making a healthy selection. This research will help make sure you select a pet you can properly care for throughout its entire life.

When many people fall in love with a pet the only question they think to ask is "How much does he or she cost?" Cost is one factor; however, the only way to protect yourself from an emotional and uninformed decision, and to make sure that you bring home the healthiest pet possible, is to inspect the pet carefully from nose-to-tail, observe its behavior over a period of time, and ask questions. Lots of questions. Tough questions.

Whatever the source of pet you are seeking - professional breeders, friends, pet stores, or other - you need to be well aware that their pets may vary widely in the quality of their health, as well as in the nature of their personality. Selecting an unhealthy pet can lead to big health care expenses. Selecting a sullen or anxious pet can interfere with your mutual enjoyment and happiness. Here are some tips to help you conduct an objective search by asking yourself and others the right questions.

## Observe current conditions

The conditions under which the pets are kept, no matter the duration, are important factors in their general health and development. When making a purchase from a reputable pet dealer, you should never have to rescue a pet from poor conditions or a bad social environment. To do so only puts your success with the pet at risk. It is important that each of the following "components of care" be well managed.

- **Habitat** - Are the pet's present living conditions clean? Is the [bedding](#) fresh and dry? Have chewed toys and old food been removed?
- **Temperature** - Is the habitat temperate, not too warm or cold? Is it monitored by a thermostat?
- **Food** - Is fresh food provided in a clean bowl or feeder? Is appropriate variety provided?
- **Water** - Is the amount of water adequate? Is it provided in a clean [bowl or feeder](#)?
- **Toys** - Does the pet have adequate [chew toys](#)?
- **Exercise** - Does the pet have tunnels, ramps, [wheels](#) or other means of exercise appropriate to its species?
- **Droppings** - Are the pet's droppings normal? Note: Signs of abnormality include strong odor, watery consistency, and color variations.
- **Socialization** - Has the pet had sufficient handling by humans? Is the pet housed in isolation or with other animals? How does the pet relate to others of its own kind? Note: Other than hamsters, most small pets thrive in company.

## Observe prospective pets in action

Because some small pets are nocturnal, observing them under "normal" conditions may be difficult. Throughout the day, and even under store lights in the evening, nocturnal animals, like hamsters and chinchillas, are likely to be sleeping. They are also likely to find customer traffic intimidating. We recommend that you visit prospective small animal pets on more than one occasion. Watch for these behaviors, good and bad:

**Gerbils** - Kept in pairs or larger groups, gerbils will rub noses, wink, thump, and sometimes even purr. If afraid, they emit a high-pitched squeak. They are active, alert animals. If depressed, they can become inactive or overly aggressive.

**Guinea Pigs** - Guinea pigs are relatively docile, but are alert animals. When excited or alarmed, they sometimes emit a high-pitched "reep-reep" sound.

**Chinchillas** - Active animals with strong hind legs, chinchillas move about with a hopping gait and are surprisingly good jumpers.

**Ferrets** - Ferrets are very playful. When they see you doing something, they often want to join in. Ferrets have a distinctive, bouncing movement, and often open their mouths and hiss as they jump around. This is an expression of exuberance, not aggression. They are not nocturnal, but go to sleep when nothing exciting is happening, often napping in unexpected places. They sleep very soundly, sometimes not responding to loud noises or touch that would wake most other animals. Adult ferrets are quiet, making few sounds after they are 6 or 8 weeks old. As they grow older, they often become very affectionate.

**Rats & Mice** - Mice and rats are also very active and have a strong instinct to climb. They need and enjoy a lot of exercise.

**Rabbits** - For any rabbit to be kept as a pet, proper handling by humans during the first months of its life is vital. Watch out for any rabbit that is easily startled when approached.

**Hamsters** - Hamsters like to chew and burrow, and prefer to have a nesting house where they can sleep undisturbed during the day. Almost all hamsters will use an [exercise wheel](#) for hours, mostly at night.

### Do a nose-to-tail health check

Be sure to observe and evaluate each of these key health indicators:

- Eyes - Clear, never cloudy; no discharge or matting below the eyes.
- Ears - Clean; no sign of redness or parasites.
- Nose - Clear passageways; no sneezing or discharge.
- Teeth - All teeth present; none overly long.
- Mouth - Free of sores or inflammation.
- Whiskers - Sufficient number; balanced in length.
- Legs and feet - Well formed; toes and nails complete and healthy.
- Tail - Complete.
- Rectum - Clean; no matting or discoloration of hair.
- Coat and Skin - Hair is smooth and thick; no patchy hair loss; no skin lesions or rash.
- Skeleton - Symmetrical; no internal lumps or bumps that would suggest abnormal internal growths.
- Weight - Appropriate for his size and age; not skinny or dehydrated.

### Questions for the pet keeper

It is important to determine whether prospective pets are receiving appropriate care. Don't be shy about asking these and any other questions that come to mind. If you are in a retail store, and the person helping you is not a small animal specialist, ask who in the store can best address your questions.

- Who determines the care regimen for each pet?
- Are there any elements of the care of these pets "out of your control?"
- Have you had disease among any of these pets?
- If you discover a problem with a pet, how do you resolve it?
- What guarantees do you offer?
- For what specific reasons have you had customers return pets?

- What equipment, diet, and care do you recommend to ensure my success with this pet?
- What problems might I encounter with this pet?
- What information resources do you recommend for learning about this type of pet?

### **Finally, do a thorough background check**

Once you have narrowed the field to your pet or pets of choice, ask these questions.

- What is the age of this pet?
- What is the sex of this pet?
- What breed is this pet?
- Where was this pet born?
- How long has this pet been in your care?
- Can I see the parents of this pet?
- (If you are shopping with a reseller) Can I contact the breeder of this pet with questions?

The time you invest in learning about a new pet before purchase will be well spent. Your patience will be rewarded with a healthier pet.