

An Exotic Approach

With more exotic animals becoming popular as pets, we are seeing an increase in those being referred for physiotherapy and hydrotherapy. Just lately we have seen an African Pygmy hedgehog, an iguana and many rabbits, ferrets, parrots and even a boa constrictor!

We are a small animal/exotics practice with a highly experienced veterinary surgeon with a Certificate in Zoological Medicine, as well as a physiotherapist, so we are never too sure exactly what is going to be in the box or container the next client has walked in with.

So, as you can imagine, we need to be familiar with handling a wide variety of animals with all their needs and likes/dislikes. For example, just how do you persuade a hedgehog that rolling up in a ball isn't going to make handling very easy? One way is to gently rock them in a blanket or towel, until they unroll and then handle them very gently. Remember of course that these exotics are pets and not wildlife most of the time so may well be used to being handled.

When you are asked to deliver treatment to an animal that is outside your normal range you have two options. One is to refer to a practice that is used to handling such animals or if there isn't one within a reasonable distance you can do it yourself.

We are always happy to offer help and advice and I'm sure many other exotic practices will do the same but there are a number of things you can consider to help yourselves.

You need to consider several different things with regards to the animal:

- Is the animal a **prey** or **predator** species? Is their response to a frightening or novel stimulus to fight or flight? A prey species such as a rabbit will be very aware of sudden noises, movements and the presence of any other animals. Their response is more likely to be flight and if a rabbit manages to leap out of your arms or off a table it could possibly cause serious damage to its spine. A predator animal however such as a bird of prey will be more likely to strike out if worried, although they too will try to escape by flight if possible.
- What is the normal habitat of the animal? Are they usually kept in a vivarium or similar under specific humidity or temperature conditions? You need to replicate these as far as reasonably possible in your treatment area.
- Is the animal diurnal or nocturnal, or even crepuscular? A nocturnal or crepuscular species such as some of the owls or sugar gliders will respond better in subdued lighting.
- What are the best handling techniques for the species, what do you need to be aware of? When handling *psittacines* (*parrot family*) look out for the beaks, with raptors (birds of prey) it's the claws you need to be aware of. Both groups have amazing strength in their respective defence tactics and can inflict serious damage.

As for those amazing cat, snake, slinky like animals otherwise known as ferrets they are best held behind their shoulders and round the chest until they calm, but remember one of their adaptations that makes them so good at their job is the ability to bend in half and twist at the same time.

- What are the feeding habits of the species? We normally recommend that a patient is starved for at least two hours before a hydrotherapy session. Rabbits are hind gut fermenters and unable to vomit, they need to have a constant flow of nutrients travelling through the gut otherwise they are at risk of gut stasis. Consider when a snake was last fed, they need days to digest, and remember they are heat seekers and find their prey by sensing the heat from them.
- What diseases can the different species carry? You need to make sure your cleaning products are active against the various bacteria and protozoa that can be transmitted by the different species.

Overall, ensure you have carried out a **full risk assessment** before treating an exotic animal, covering handling, zoonoses and risks to both yourself and anyone else in the vicinity.

Don't forget that the owners know their animals best, and they can help you with their likes, dislikes and little quirks. If you need any help with any specific animals please don't hesitate to contact us.

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