Wet Tail (Regional Enteritis, Proliferative Ileitis) in Hamsters

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'Wet tail' is a very serious intestinal disease of young hamsters, which often causes death. It gets its name because the main symptom is diarrhea, and affected hamsters often have wet and dirty tails. It is caused by bacteria called *Lawsonia intracellularis*, which can also cause disease in swine, horses, dogs, ferrets, primates, and other animals. This disease does not appear to be transmissible to people.

Wet tail is more commonly seen in hamsters of weaning age (3-6 weeks old), but hamsters of all ages are susceptible. Hamsters sold in pet stores generally have just been weaned, so 'wet tail' may occur soon after the hamster is taken home. All breeds of hamsters can develop wet tail, but long-haired 'teddy bear' hamsters are most susceptible.

What are the symptoms of wet tail?

Hamsters with wet tail are generally lethargic with a loss of appetite and generally stop grooming. They have a very fluid diarrhea, and develop a wet, soiled, and matted area around the anus and tail. The diarrhea causes them to become dehydrated, so their eyes may appear dull and sunken. They may sit 'hunched up' and be irritable because of the abdominal discomfort. In serious cases, blood may be seen in the diarrhea or around the anus, and/or the rectum may protrude out of the anus because of the constant straining.

Wet tail is a very serious disease, and hamsters with the above symptoms should be examined by a veterinarian immediately.

How is wet tail treated?

Antibiotics are given to kill the bacteria. Supportive care is given including subcutaneous fluids to correct the dehydration, antidiarrheal medication to alleviate some of the symptoms, and the hamster is kept warm and clean. Even with treatment, most hamsters die of this disease, often as soon as 48 hours after the onset of initial signs.

Can wet tail be prevented?

Wet tail can not necessarily be prevented, but the risk of a hamster acquiring this disease can be reduced. Hamsters should be kept in a clean environment, since transmission of the bacteria from the mother or other hamsters to the young occurs when the young eat fecal-contaminated food or water. Before acquiring a young hamster, ask the source about the occurrence of wet tail in their facility. Choose your hamster from a line of hamsters that has no history of this disease. Avoid stressing young hamsters when moving them to a new environment, e.g.; limit handling them the first few days, keep the hamsters on the same food they were eating for a few days and then slowly switch to a new food if necessary, etc.

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