



PYOMETRA IN HAMSTERS

Pyometra (Pyo) is an uncommon but potentially fatal condition that everyone caring for a female hamster - especially a Syrian - should know how to spot.

Pyo is an infection within the uterus. It can develop suddenly, and progress quickly. Only female hamsters are at risk, and it can be caused by a variety of bacteria.

SYMPTOMS OF PYOMETRA

- Discharge from the vagina followed by a strong odour
- Blood around the vagina or on bedding
- Swelling of the abdominal area, or a bloated stomach
- A change in behaviour such as aggression, lack of activity
- Hunched when moving- this is a sign of pain and discomfort
- Reduced or lack of appetite

It's important to note that there are two types of pyometra, both with their own symptoms, some of which cross over.



OPEN PYOMETRA

In open pyometra cases, discharge or blood can be seen coming from the vaginal area. This has come from the uterus and is able to leave the body.

Due to its nature and the visible signs and symptoms that follow with open Pyometra it is easier to spot and generally more likely to be treated in time.

The first sign is discharge or blood, often accompanied by a strong smell of infection which can be distinguished from the smell of urine. It can smell like a particularly strong version of the hamster's usual heat-cycle scent.

CLOSED PYOMETRA

In closed pyometra, there are no signs of blood or discharge and there will be very little smell as the infection is unable to leave the uterus and the body.

The lack of opportunities for the infection to leave the uterus will be a major factor in the swelling of the stomach which is a sign that the uterus is expanding abnormally. This will need to be treated urgently to prevent the uterus from rupturing.

Due to its nature and the lack of more obvious visible signs, closed pyometra can be harder to spot with many cases going unnoticed until much later. This means it is less likely to be treated on time and is arguably the more dangerous of the two types.

WHY DO HAMSTERS DEVELOP PYOMETRA?

Unlike many other mammals, when female hamsters come into heat they **DO NOT BLEED**: they don't have a visible menstrual "period". Any vaginal bleeding is an urgent concern, and immediate veterinary attention is needed.

A hamster's body naturally absorbs any fluid or matter in the uterus, through the bloodstream. This is a sensitive biological process, and things can very occasionally go wrong.

Hamsters who have had babies are more likely to have issues with their reproductive systems, including pyometra. There is actually no conclusive scientific research that proves this, but anecdotal evidence from vets, rescues and breeders all note this trend. Hamsters who have not been pregnant can develop pyo, but hamsters who are known to have been pregnant account for the majority of cases that vets see.

TREATMENT

There are two main treatments for pyometra.

The effectiveness of these treatments deeply depends on various factors such as age, health, the severity of the infection etc.

The first (and least effective) treatment is prescribed antibiotics.

Vets will often provide this for hamsters with signs of open pyometra, and though this is unlikely to cure pyometra it can help reduce the infection so that surgery is possible.

The second and more effective treatment is surgery: a hysterectomy.. Though it comes with much greater risks it is the only guaranteed way to cure pyometra.

The surgery will involve a spay [(the removal of the uterus and ovaries). This is an incredibly invasive surgery: not only is the risk of infection from the operation high but the risk of the hamster passing due to the anaesthetic is also a big factor. A hamster who survives the initial surgery is still at risk for at least 7 days, and should be closely monitored in a hospital setup.

If you suspect your hamster has Pyometra it's important to consult an **exotics** vet: one with experience in caring for hamsters is ideal. When considering surgery it's important to weigh all the risks involved including is the hamster is well enough to go through with something so extreme, hamsters which are elderly or weak from the infection or suffering with other health issues may need to be humanely euthanised but please **consult an exotics vet before considering any of the options.**

If you're unsure of your vet's recommendation then don't be afraid to seek a second opinion, and also consider the financial strain which comes with such treatments. Choosing a treatment route for a hamster with pyo is very much a personal decision, with all the factors weighed up.

AFTERCARE

PREPARING YOUR HAMSTER'S HOME AFTER SURGERY

Hamsters are unable to wear a cone or protective clothing after surgery, so you'll need to adapt their home accordingly. Remove any sharp items such as branches, spiky sprays and substrates including sand, so your hamster does not open their surgery site again and to stop substrates from entering the wound while it heals.

For the first few days remove their wheel: they will be sore and the risk of opening the wound up is high so removing the wheel will prevent them from opening the stitches as they run on the wheel.

Hospital cage

While it is not necessary to do this you can setup a hospital cage including only the basics while they heal, this also makes it easier for you to access them for the purposes of providing them with medication.

Medication-

After your hamster has returned from the vets they will have been prescribed two lots of medication, one being a pain relief and another being an antibiotic to fight off any infection, the length of time and the dosage will vary per individual case.

Follow your vets advice regarding the administration of the medication, complete the course fully, and be sure to have plain porridge and baby food on hand as these help hamsters to take their meds better.