

An Armadillo And A Degu Visit The Clinic

Dr. Murray discusses pet armadillos and degus.

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Posted: July 28, 2010, 5 a.m. EDT

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Degus are prone to respiratory infections.

Recently an owner brought in a 3-banded armadillo. This is not our native 9-banded North American armadillo. The 3-banded armadillo is from South America. In the wild, it eats mostly ants, termites and other insects. Its characteristic "armor" is actually made up of keratin, which is the same material that makes up human fingernails. These armadillos are one of the two armadillo species that can roll up into a tight ball to completely cover their head, face, tail and body. They are smaller than our native 9-banded armadillos. In general, armadillos are friendly animals and make good pets.

The owner had just purchased this armadillo and wanted to make sure it was healthy. One of the diseases that can infect native armadillos is leprosy. The owner was rightfully concerned about whether 3-banded armadillos are also at risk for leprosy. I checked the zoo and wildlife textbook, but it only mentioned the native 9-banded armadillo. Next I consulted several zoo vets (thanks to Drs. Raines, Coke and Flanagan), one pathologist (thanks to Dr. Williams), and the National Hansen's Disease (i.e. leprosy) Program at Louisiana State University (thanks to Dr. Truman). Who knew there was still a National Leprosy Program through the U.S. Public Health Service? Fortunately, they all thought the 3-banded armadillos did not get leprosy like the 9-banded armadillos. Tank is doing just fine.

The other new mammal was a degu. Degus are small rodents from Chile. They are also called the brush-tailed rat because they do have fur on their tails, unlike most rats and mice. Degus are quite similar to chinchillas and guinea pigs, and they are starting to become popular as pets.

Unfortunately this little guy was in bad shape. He had a respiratory infection. Respiratory disease is the most common problem in rats. Rats in general are prone to respiratory infections from bacteria, mycoplasma and viruses. Quite often rats will have both mycoplasma and a virus, which will produce a chronic illness that cannot be cured. Other cases will have a bacterial pneumonia in addition to the mycoplasmal and viral infection. Unfortunately bacterial pneumonia is often a fatal disease despite treatment with antibiotics, as was the case for this little degu.

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