

INCORPORATING PET FISH INTO YOUR SMALL ANIMAL PRACTICE ¹

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BACKGROUND

Fish are the most popular pets in America, yet rarely benefit from veterinary care. More than 65 million fish are maintained in households throughout the United States, and fishowners frequently have other pets, such as dogs, cats, and birds. The value of individual fish can range from less than one dollar to many thousands of dollars for show-quality koi. Home aquarists, like other animal enthusiasts, often breed and show their pets and participate in special interest groups including local aquarium societies and national organizations such as the American Cichlid Association and the American Killifish Association. There are several factors that make it advantageous to consider adding pet fish medicine to your small animal practice at the present time. Over the past 5 to 10 years, some veterinary schools have begun to incorporate aquatic animal medicine into their curriculum. Many recent graduates have had some level of exposure to fish medicine as part of their veterinary education, and some individuals have had one or more intensive classes and/or clinical rotations in fish medicine. In addition, some veterinary colleges and national meetings now offer continuing education opportunities for graduate veterinarians in this area.

Concurrently, the Food and Drug Administration is determining which remedies sold for aquarium fish through the pet trade are appropriate for over-the-counter sales. It seems likely that some of these products will be removed from the market over the next few years, which may mean that aquarists will have to obtain certain medications, particularly antibiotics, through their local veterinarians. If veterinarians are going to serve this important component of the pet trade, the time to start preparing is now. Unfortunately, there is a feeling in certain segments of the pet fish industry that veterinary interest in aquarium fish is purely profit motivated. In reality, it seems likely that it is

related to the diversity of interests of veterinary students and recent graduates as well as to the maturation of aquaculture as an animal industry. Nonetheless, it is critical that veterinarians demonstrate their ability to make a real contribution to the aquarium trade, and this implies obtaining a basic level of expertise that will enable them to identify problems accurately, assess husbandry practices, and recommend therapy responsibly.

TYPES OF FISH

Although there are several thousand species and varieties of fish sold through the pet trade, Gratzek and Mathews (1993) have divided popular freshwater fish into seven main groups. The **Cyprinoids** include tiger barbs, zebra danios, and goldfish. Many fish in this group are peaceful, hardy, and well suited to a community tank. Most live bearers are members of the family **Poeciliidae**, which includes the guppies, black mollies, swordtails, and platys. Fish in this group are peaceful, active, and ideal for beginners. The anal fin of the males is modified to form a gonopodium, which is used for internal fertilization. The female is able to store the sperm for a period of time, and one breeding may result in more than one "pregnancy." The gestation period is 4 to 6 weeks, and the live born young are able to eat a commercial dry diet immediately. Killifish are members of the family **Cyprinodontidae**. Although highly prized because of their bright coloration, they are ill suited to inexperienced aquarists. Their husbandry requirements are demanding, they are short-lived, and their temperament is often not suitable for a community tank. The **Siluroid** catfishes are popular aquarium pets. They are primarily bottom dwellers and effective scavengers. Supplemental vitamin C is recommended for this group of fish and can be easily provided by adding sliced, parboiled zucchini to the diet. **Characins**, represented by tetras, are

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