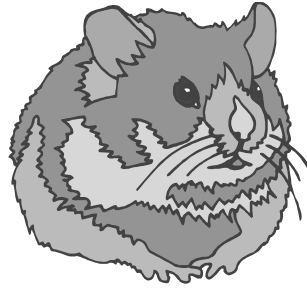


Basic Information on **Hamsters and Gerbils**



Hamsters and gerbils are great "first" pets. But they have different needs and personalities so read on to choose the best pet for you and your family.

Hamsters in General

Hamsters, *Mesocricetus auratus*, are nocturnal. This means they are most active at night. This is not a bad quality but be prepared to tolerate the squeak of an exercise wheel, trips to the water bottle, and general bumps in the night from your hamster in its cage. Because hamsters are nocturnal they have gained a reputation for being ill tempered. But, if someone woke you in the middle of the night to play, how even-tempered would you be?!

Hamsters are available in many colors, brown, white, gray, cream and combinations of these. They are also available in short and long hair varieties.

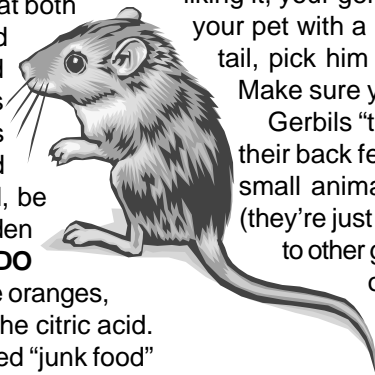
Always purchase a young hamster, 2 to 3 months of age. Select one during the evening or late afternoon. Since they are nocturnal, they are more likely to be active during these times. Look for clear eyes, a bright curious attitude, and a clean, dry bottom. Hamsters move slowly. They usually amble around their cage looking for stored food or going to their exercise wheel.

Hamsters must be kept by themselves. As they sexually mature, they will begin to fight. If you wish to create little hamsters, the male and female must each have a separate cage during the time when they are not actively breeding.

Hamsters mature sexually at 3 months of age. Their gestation period (length of pregnancy) is 16-18 days and they will usually have 2-12 babies. A hamster's average lifespan is two to four years.

A Hamster's Diet

Hamsters are omnivores. This means they eat both vegetables and meat. Their basic diet should consist of a high quality dry seed mix (with added protein pellets) supplemented by small amounts of fruits, vegetables and lab blocks. Lab blocks are a nutritionally complete kibble designed to feed laboratory animals. Since hamsters store food, be careful when giving fresh food. Remove any hidden stores of uneaten food before it becomes rancid. **DO NOT** give your hamsters or gerbils citrus fruits like oranges, lemons or grapefruit. They cannot metabolize the citric acid. To keep your hamster or gerbil healthy do not feed "junk food"



like ice cream, potato chips, french fries, or candy.

In order to ensure your pet's health we recommend vitamins be added to the water in the water bottle. Remember to change the water daily

Gerbils in General

Gerbils, *Meriones unguiculatus*, are small, typically white bellied brown rodents. They also come in black, brown, cinnamon and white! Combinations of these colors are also sometimes available. Although they do take naps during the day, they are not nocturnal. They are curious and generally do not bite.

Gerbils are highly social animals. They should be kept in pairs or groups. Although they can be kept singly, they must be given a lot of attention to keep them happy. If you don't wish to breed them, keep two females or two males. If they are from the same litter they will do quite well together. Gerbils are great for families where each child wants a special pet.

DO NOT keep two females with one male. The female is the dominant of the species and eventually the two females will fight.

When picking out a gerbil look for a bright eyed curious animal that does not readily bite. Scoop up the animal gently. It should scurry up and down your arms interested in exploration. Its nose should be clear with no discharge and its rear should be dry. With handling, your gerbil will calm down and will stay with you without trying to jump off. Gerbils move quickly. Even after they tame down they will still scurry. As they age they will slow down a bit but they never move slowly. This can make them unsuitable for very small children.

Gerbils like to be petted. As they grow older they may actually fall asleep while you pet them. If a gerbil becomes irritated with you, it will push your hand away. If this occurs don't force it into your hand. Leave it alone and try again later.

Never pick up your gerbil by the end of the tail. Besides not liking it, your gerbil's skin may slough off in your hand leaving your pet with a painful injury. If you must pick him up by the tail, pick him up by the base of the tail close to its body. Make sure you feel the bones through the skin.

Gerbils "thump". This is normal behavior! They pound their back feet on the floor making a lot of noise for such a small animal. Young animals will thump for no reason (they're just learning). Adult animals "thump" as a warning to other gerbils "that's mine leave it alone" or as a warning of danger "the cat is back", or during mating.

Since gerbils are social animals they will interact in many ways. They will play with

each other, groom each other and greet each other. When they play, they will stand up on their back legs and look as though they are boxing. This is normal play and nothing to be concerned about. When gerbils greet each other they look as though they are kissing. Actually they are tasting each other's saliva. They remember each other by taste.

Gerbils also rub their tummies on their stuff. They are marking their territory. If you look carefully, you will see a small narrow patch of bare skin on the tummy. This is their scent gland. It will be larger on males. They will mark everything they consider theirs including their family members.

Gerbils also dig and build nests. Since they are a burrowing animal this is part of their natural behavior. Offer them plenty of litter in their home to satisfy this need.

Gerbils mature around 3-5 months. Their gestation period (length of pregnancy) is 24-25 days and they will have 4-12 babies. A gerbil's average lifespan is 2-6 years.

A Gerbil's Diet

In the wild a gerbil's diet consists of seeds, roots, and leaves. They are mainly vegetarian but do supplement their diet with small insects. We recommend a high quality mixed seed diet along with lab blocks. As we mentioned before, lab blocks are a nutritionally complete kibble designed to feed laboratory animals. You may supplement this with small amounts of fresh vegetables and fruits. Make sure your gerbil is eating a complete diet. Sometimes they pick out the "good stuff" and leave the rest.

Although gerbils are desert animals and drink very little water, they still should have access to fresh water at all times. Change the water daily and add vitamins.

Chew Toys

Hamster and gerbil teeth constantly grow. If they don't wear them down, the teeth will curl up into their mouth which makes eating difficult, if not impossible. Provide the hamster or gerbil with wood chews or rawhide chews. This will help them keep their teeth the appropriate length.

Housing

In their natural habitat a hamster's "home" consists of many tunnels. The Habitrail by Hagen, S.A.M. Homes by Penn Plax or Crittertrail by Superpet provide hamsters with the type of natural environment they love. Kids love the bright colors and the add-on units that create a wonderful playground for their pet. Gerbils love the many tunnels of these units, too! This type of cage also has the advantage of changeability. The tunnels can be reorganized into new configurations to give your pet variety.

B&B Pet Stop also carries a full line of wire cages and accessories. Many have multiple levels that hamsters love. Gerbils do not seem to take advantage of multi-level cages. They are more interested in floor space than in vertical space.

Most cages will come with an exercise wheel. If not, be sure to purchase a wheel separately. Hamsters and gerbils love to exercise. Another item designed to provide exercise for small pets is a run-about play ball. This is a clear plastic ball with a trap door. The animal is completely enclosed while it runs around the house. (The play ball is also a great place to keep the pet while the cage is being cleaned.)

Tip: Some gerbils have learned how to open the door on run-about-balls. Use a piece of tape to ensure this does not occur. Always supervise your pet in it's ball.

Clean your pet's cage at least once each week using a product like "Quick Clean" by Canopy Scientific to disinfect. "Cage Shield" by Canopy Scientific will coat cage surfaces and prevent feces and food from sticking. Also, after scrubbing all stuck on matter, rinse with a 10% bleach solution to kill germs and sanitize. Remember to rinse well several times with clear water.

Litter

Replace the bedding in the clean cage with pine shavings, aspen shavings, corn cob, or Carefresh® (a recycled paper product). (Do not use cedar. Most small animals are irritated by the aromatic oils in the cedar.) The litter should be two to three inches deep. Hamsters and gerbils like to play, hide and build nests. Provide them with a cotton bedding such as Critter Nest®, Bed Fluff®, or Midnight Blanket® for nest building.

Handling your pet

Three rules for handling hamsters and gerbils

1. After the pet is setup in it's new home, don't handle it for at least 24 hours. This gives the pet time to get accustomed to it's new surroundings. Handling before the 24 hour period may induce stress in your pet. Gerbils will go rigid when they are stressed. If this happens return it to it's cage and LEAVE IT ALONE! It should return to normal in a few minutes. When hamsters are stressed, they will just bite.
2. Wash your hands before handling your pet. If your hands smell like "lunch", the hamster or gerbil might just take a nibble.
3. ESPECIALLY HAMSTERS! Wake your pet before trying to pick it up. Blow gently on your pet. Only when it is fully awake do you try to scoop it up. Grabbing your pet while it is asleep is not only bad manners but may result in a defensive bite.

Please Note: The information in this handout is meant to provide basic information only. There are several good books available on the care and maintenance of hamsters and gerbils. Please see a salesperson for further information.

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