



HOUSING A HAMSTER/GERBIL

The Habitat

Both Hamsters and gerbils should have a spacious habitat, larger if housing multiple animals together. If multiple animals are sharing a single habitat, they should have multiples of everything (i.e. two houses/hide spaces, two wheels, two food bowls, two water bottles, etc.) to decrease the possibility of aggression and exclusion of submissive animals. Secure habitats are a must, as both species can be escape artists.



Hamsters and gerbils can live in a variety of cages, including wire cages and glass aquariums, but plastic aquariums are not recommended as they are very avid chewers and can chew holes in the habitat. Their enclosure should have deep basins to help facilitate their penchant for burrowing. Habitats with multiple levels is strongly recommended. Wire cages should have a solid bottom and wires that are close together to prevent escaping. Hamsters are naturally "perimeter roamers" so the cage should be set up to support this instinctual behavior.

Bedding/litter

Gerbils and hamsters naturally burrow and nest in their environments. Adequate amount of bedding should be supplied to support these behaviors and bedding should be soft and non-abrasive. Naturally colored paper-based bedding works best. Additionally, grass hays are an excellent substrate to support burrowing and nesting tendencies. Aromatic woods, such as cedar and pine, should never be used for bedding as they pose a risk of respiratory issues.

Cleaning the Habitat

In addition to removing waste, old fresh supplemental foods and soiled/wet bedding daily, more thorough cleaning of the habitat and its fixtures (water bottles/bowls, food dishes, etc) should be performed daily to every few days, depending on the size of the enclosure. During the "deep cleans" habitat occupants should be moved to a separate safe location, and the cage components washed with hot soapy water or dilute bleach (approximately 1:30 bleach to water ratio) and then rinsed and dried. Regular cleaning will reduce contact with waste and associated aerosolized debris which can cause skin and respiratory tract irritation.

However, it should be of note that gerbils generally excrete relatively small amounts of urine due to their natural adaptation of thriving in a desert environment.



BEHAVIOR

Enrichment

Like rabbits and guinea pigs, hamsters and gerbils also have natural behaviors that need to be cultivated and supported in captivity to provide mental and behavioral health. Natural behaviors including playing, exploring, chewing, hoarding, hiding, and burrowing. The following should be supplied in their habitats to support total health:

- Hiding spaces
- Safe, appropriate chews to support dental health (incisor teeth grow continuously)
- Exercise wheel for physical enrichment
 - o Hamsters also really like tubes shapes to play in
- Grass hay and bedding for burrowing and nesting
 - o They especially enjoy hay varieties with seed heads, such as oat hay, which promote foraging behaviors

****Multiple enrichment items should be presented and rotated at least monthly to maintain proper stimulation**

Handling

Handling and holding gerbils and hamsters should only be done by an experienced and gentle handler, as these animals are small and delicate. "Hand-taming" these animals is often a long process that takes a lot of patience, time and consistency from the handler. Handling tips below:

- Wash hands before and after handling.
- Don't approach your hamster/gerbil from above as it mimics a predatory position for them and induces stress
- Move slowly in the animal's line of vision and gently scoop into your hand, using two hands for support before lifting.
- Do limit handling time according to the individual animal's comfort level.
- NEVER pick up a gerbil by its tail as it could cause the skin of the tail to deglove (tail slip)
- NEVER handle sleeping hamsters/gerbils, as this could unnecessarily startle them and may result in biting behavior

Playtime

A solid wheel for hamsters and gerbils is a must in their habitat as they are very active and benefit from physical enrichment. As referenced above, hamsters and gerbils can be hand tamed with a lot of work and socialization. An appropriately sized exercise ball for can be used for time outside the cage if desired, but your pet should always be supervised in the ball for safety reasons. Gerbils are crepuscular (most active during dawn and dusk) while



hamsters are nocturnal (active during the night). Their activity times should be considered when interacting with them.

Safety

If any new animals are brought into an established environment, they should always be quarantined initially as a safety measure to prevent any infectious agents from being introduced. Cage items should be inspected for chewing and wear and replaced as appropriate. All wheels should be solid to prevent leg entrapment or injury. Hamsters especially can be territorial, so if dwarf hamsters are kept together, they should be closely monitored for aggression or other negative behavior. Temperature control is important for all species, including hamsters and gerbils, and the habitat should be kept out of direct sunlight and drafts.

Hamsters do have a propensity to hibernate (torpor) during the winter months when temperatures drop below 68 degrees Fahrenheit. During this time, their metabolic rates slow and they may appear lifeless. There is a risk of dehydration, malnourishment, or hypothermia so avoiding hibernation is ideal for hamster owners if possible. The best way to prevent this state is to ensure that food and water is always available and the habitat is kept in an area where a consistent mild temperature can be maintained (between 68-75 degrees Fahrenheit) and there is no access to open windows or drafts.

Roommates

Gerbils do best in same sex pairs or small groups and should be introduced and assimilated into the group when they are young. Dwarf hamsters do well by themselves or in same sex pairs if they were introduced at a young age. Syrian Hamsters should only be housed singly. Cross-species pairings (i.e. a dwarf hamster with a gerbil) are not advised.

DIET

Unlike rabbits and guinea pigs, hamsters and gerbils are omnivores and enjoy a large variety of foodstuffs in the wild including vegetables and greens, grains, fruits, proteins, and fats. Gerbils and hamsters are selective eaters and also have a tendency to hoard food for later, so care should be taken to take food caching into account when feeding these species.

Pellets

The majority (75%) of a gerbil or hamster's diet should consist of high-quality, species specific, uniformly pelleted food. This uniform presentation prevents selective eating and ensures that hamsters and gerbils receive a balanced intake of both macronutrients and



micronutrients. Muesli or seed-based mixes are nutritionally inappropriate and will lead to imbalanced nutrition and potentially disease.

Supplementary foods

In addition to pellets, supplementary foods such as vegetables and greens, grains, seeds, fruits, proteins and fats are important to provide in appropriate amounts to best mimic the natural diet of gerbils and hamsters. These foods should make up the remaining 20-25% of the diet. The table below outlines appropriate offerings and amounts in each category. Feeding a variety of the below not only provides quality nutrition, but also provides nutritional enrichment by keeping mealtime interesting.

VEGETABLES & GREENS	GRAINS	FRUITS	Proteins	Fats
1-2 tsp daily	0.5-1 tsp daily	<1 tsp every other day	0.5 tsp 2-3x/week	0.5 tsp 2-3x/week
Diversity of Lettuces	Cooked brown rice and whole wheat pasta	Apple (no seeds)	Hard boiled eggs	Pumpkin seeds (unsalted)
Squash	Whole grain cereal (unsweetened)	Melons	Mealworms	Sunflower seeds (no shell, unsalted)
Green Pepper	Whole-grain crackers	Banana	Cooked beans	Pistachios (no shell, unsalted)
Cucumber	Oats	Berries	Cooked chicken	Pecans (unsalted)
Zucchini	Barley	Kiwi	Dubia roaches	

Treats should be physiologically appropriate for the hamster and gerbil's digestive tract (i.e. low in sugar, no artificial colors/dyes/preservatives, etc.) and should not exceed 5% of total food intake.

Water

Fresh water from multiple sources should be made available within the habitat – multiple sources are especially important with housing gerbils or dwarf hamsters in pairs. However, due to biological adaptations of gerbils to survive in their natural desert environment, gerbils will drink less than other small rodents.



HEALTH AND PREVENTATIVE MEDICINE

Finding A Hamster & Gerbil-Savvy Veterinarian

It is important to locate a veterinary office before welcoming a hamster or gerbil to the household comfortable seeing small pets, which can be challenging.

- Boarded-specialists specializing in exotic companion mammals can be found by visiting the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners' webpage (<https://abvp.com/animal-owners/find-an-abvp-specialist/>)
- Veterinarians who have a particular interest in small exotic mammals can be found by visiting the Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians' webpage (www.aemv.org).

Examinations

It is recommended that all newly acquired hamsters or gerbils receive a complete physical examination. Thereafter, you should have your pet examined by a veterinarian every 6-12 months and as soon as any signs of illness/disease are noted.

Changes in appetite or urination/defecation

Any change in appetite, activity level, or urination/defecation should be reported to your veterinarian. As prey species, they tend to hide outward signs of pain or illness so often the monitoring of appetite, activity level, and urination/defecation is the first sign of a concern. It is a best practice to regularly monitor/document these three areas daily to identify normal behavior patterns for your particular animal(s).

Dental Health

Gerbils and Hamsters have yellowish, open rooted incisors, which continuously grow, so it is important to promote regular wear through a variety of fresh supplementary food offerings as well as species appropriate chews such as dried untreated sticks and cardboard. Any dietary inefficiency or trauma that results in misalignment of teeth or weak/broken teeth can lead to uneven wear and malocclusion. It is important to regularly monitor dental health and communicate with a veterinarian if anything seems abnormal. Other possible dental issues that require immediate medical attention include abscesses and localized infections that result in pain and inflammation. Common signs of dental issues include lack of appetite, drooling, eye/nasal discharge, swelling and pain, lumps, and weight loss.

Spaying and Neutering

Neutering of male rodents is a fairly common procedure and should be available at most exotic veterinarian hospitals. Spaying female rodents tend to be a little trickier but also has its benefits (prevention of ovarian cysts or other reproductive diseases). A discussion about both the benefits and risks for both procedures should be had at time of first appointment.



Nail Trims/Grooming

Hamsters and gerbils should have their nails trimmed regularly to prevent overgrowth. Bathing hamsters and gerbils in water is unnecessary as they generally do a good job of keeping themselves groomed. Hamsters and gerbils can be offered a sand bath regularly to absorb natural oils in their coats. Simply provide a container with high quality sand specifically designated for gerbils/hamsters 2-3 times a week for 10-15 minutes at a time to allow them to engage in their natural bathing behaviors.

CLASSROOM CONSIDERATIONS:

- Hamsters and Gerbils can sometimes live up to 2-3+ years with appropriate care!
- Gerbils and hamsters can make entertaining pets and have less space and “outside cage” requirements than rabbits and guinea pigs.
- Hamsters do well alone, so if you are looking for a single pet, hamsters are a great choice!
- Gerbils and hamsters need DAILY care and interaction – it is not appropriate to leave the unattended in a classroom environment over the weekend.
- Handling of gerbils and hamsters is only recommended when they are properly hand tamed by experienced individuals. Interaction with children should be limited to observing them in the cage and exercise ball as well as helping with general feeding, husbandry and record keeping responsibilities.
- Hamsters and gerbils that are appropriately socialized and have a caretaker dedicated to proper physical and mental care can make excellent classroom additions.

HELPFUL LINKS:

All About Enrichment

<https://www.oxbowanimalhealth.com/blog/all-about-enrichment-handout>

<https://www.oxbowanimalhealth.com/blog/the-importance-of-physical-enrichment>

<https://www.oxbowanimalhealth.com/blog/games-with-pets-new-enrichment-handout>

Healthy Treats and Foods for Hamsters and Gerbils

<https://www.oxbowanimalhealth.com/blog/healthy-treats-and-foods-for-hamsters-and-gerbils>

Dental Disease in Small Mammals

<https://www.oxbowanimalhealth.com/blog/dental-disease-in-small-mammals/>