



The Syrian hamster (*Mesocricetus auratus*) is a small rodent belonging to the hamster subfamily, Cricetinae. Also known as the golden hamster or teddy bear hamster (long-haired variety), it is one of the most popular types of hamsters kept as pets worldwide.



HISTORY AND ORIGINS

- **Wild Origin:** Syrian hamsters are native to arid regions of northern Syria and southern Turkey. They were first discovered in the wild in the 1830s.
- **Domestication:** The modern pet Syrian hamster originates from a group of wild hamsters captured in Syria in 1930. They have been bred extensively since then as pets.

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

- **Size:** Syrian hamsters are the largest of the pet hamster species, typically growing to about 5-7 inches (12-18 cm) in length, with females being larger than males.
- **Lifespan:** They live for about 2 to 3 years on average.
- **Color:** Originally, they were golden-brown with a lighter underbelly, but selective breeding has produced a variety of colors and patterns, including white, black, cream, and combinations like banded or spotted.
- **Coat:** Their fur can be short (commonly known as the golden hamster) or long (often referred to as the teddy bear hamster).
- **Reproduction:** One fascinating fact about the Syrian hamster is that it has the shortest gestation period of the placental mammals at 16 days.

BEHAVIOR AND TEMPERAMENT

- **Solitary:** Syrian hamsters are solitary by nature and prefer to live alone. They can become aggressive if housed with other hamsters.
- **Nocturnal:** They are most active during the evening and nighttime, spending their days mostly sleeping.
- **Tameable:** With regular gentle handling, a hamster can become quite attached to the students and enjoy being held. You should only keep one Syrian hamster per cage. Syrian hamsters are solitary animals and can become territorial and aggressive if housed with other hamsters. Even littermates that get along when they are young will usually start fighting as they mature. To avoid stress and injury, it's best to keep them alone.



HOUSING

- **Cage Size:** Syrian hamsters need a spacious cage, bigger is always better. Multi-level cages can also be beneficial.
- **Bedding:** Syrian hamsters need two types of bedding: absorbent substrate and nesting material. Place the absorbent substrate on the bottom of the cage. Then, provide nesting material so your hamster can make a comfortable little bed to burrow into. Use paper-based bedding or aspen shavings. Avoid pine or cedar shavings as their odor can be harmful.
- **Hideouts:** Provide a small house or hideout where your hamster can retreat and feel secure. It will bring the nesting material into the hideout.
- **Wheel:** A solid-surface exercise wheel (minimum 8-12 inches in diameter) is essential for exercise. Hamsters will run in the wheel, especially at night.
- **Chew Toys:** Syrian hamsters need to chew to keep their teeth healthy, so provide wooden toys or untreated wooden blocks.

DIET

Hamsters are omnivores, so they can eat both plant and animal matter but you should be careful not to give them too much. Most hamsters will carry their food to an area, usually in their bed, using their cheek pouches. When the cheek pouches are full of food, the hamster's head can easily become three times its normal width.

- **Hamster Pellets:** Provides a balanced diet. They come in many shapes, but often look like small biscuits, wafers, or cereal.
- **Lab Blocks:** Hamsters should be fed a quality lab block rodent diet to provide a complete nutritional diet. Lab blocks also help in keeping the hamster's teeth from becoming too long as they gnaw on the food.
- **Hamster Mix:** Provides a high-quality hamster mix that includes seeds, grains, and pellets.
- **Fresh Vegetables:** Offer small amounts of fresh veggies like carrots, broccoli, and cucumber. Avoid giving too much to prevent diarrhea.
- **Fruits:** Occasionally offer small pieces of fruit like an apple or banana. Avoid citrus fruits.
- **Protein:** Small amounts of cooked chicken, egg, or mealworms can be given as a protein source.
- **Fresh Water:** Water bottles with a stainless-steel tube and bead are the most efficient and sanitary means of providing water to a hamster. They are easily cleaned and the hamster cannot foul their water with urine or feces as with a ceramic bowl. Since these bottles can be hung on the outside of the cage, the animal cannot climb on or chew the bottle. Clean and refill the water bottle when it is low, and at least twice weekly.



CLEANING

- **Spot Cleaning:** Remove soiled bedding and waste daily.
- **Full Cleaning:** Once a week, replace all the bedding and clean the cage with mild soap and water. Avoid using harsh chemicals.

HEALTH

- **Common Issues:** Watch for signs of wet tail, respiratory issues, or overgrown teeth. If you notice anything unusual, consult a veterinarian who specializes in small animals.
- **Nail Care:** Occasionally, their nails may need trimming if they grow too long.
- **Scent Glands:** Hamsters have scent glands located on either side of their backs that secrete an odor they can identify. If you see a round dark patch on their skin on their flanks, that is the scent gland.

ENRICHMENT

- **Toys and Activities:** Provide tunnels, tubes, and other toys to keep your hamster mentally stimulated. A hamster ball is a great way to allow your pet to exercise safely outside of the cage.
- **Safe Exploration:** Allow your hamster some time outside the cage in a safe, enclosed area or playpen. Students should sit on the floor quietly, allowing the hamster to move from one student to the other.

HANDLING

Holding a hamster requires a gentle and patient approach, especially because they are small, delicate, and can be easily startled.

- **Preparation:** Have the students wash their hands before they handle their dwarf hamster. This will remove chemicals or residues that might make the dwarf hamster nervous or cause them to bite.
- **Calm Setting:** Choose a quiet, distraction-free area for handling the dwarf hamster to help them feel secure. Have the students sit quietly in a circle on the floor and allow the hamster to sniff their hands before allowing them to pick the hamster up. Have them avoid sudden movements, always have the student move slowly, quick movements can startle the hamster and may lead to them becoming scared.
- **How to Pick Up The Hamster:** Use both hands and gently scoop the hamster up using both hands. Place one hand underneath the hamster and the other over their back. Avoid grabbing too tightly or squeezing. Make sure to support the hamster's entire body, including their legs, to make them feel safe and secure. Once the hamster is comfortable with being held, have the student cradle them in their cupped hands and hold them close to their body.



- **Handling Time:** Have the students only hold the hamster for a short period of time, usually a minute or two. Watch for stress signs, if the hamster becomes scared or begins struggling, place the hamster back into their cage gently.
- **Exercise:** Provide the hamster with an exercise wheel in its cage. Placing the hamster inside a hamster ball is good to allow the hamster to safely roam around the classroom for a short period. Hamster balls and exercise wheels provide essential physical activity that helps maintain their health and well-being. Hamsters are naturally active and need regular exercise to stay healthy. Regular exercise helps prevent obesity, which can lead to health problems and shorten life span.

HELPFUL LINKS

Recommended Diets:

<http://usa.hagen.com/Small-Animal/Nutrition/Basic/H1004>

<https://www.kaytee.com/all-products/small-animal/forti-diet-pro-health-dental-hamster-gerbil>

<https://www.kaytee.com/all-products/small-animal/natures-harvest-hamster-and-gerbil-food>

Chew Treats:

<https://www.kaytee.com/all-products/small-animal/carousel-chew-toy-apple-small>

<https://www.kaytee.com/all-products/small-animal/superfood-treat-stick>

<http://usa.hagen.com/Small-Animal/Toys/Chew/61318>

<http://usa.hagen.com/Small-Animal/Toys/Chew/61467>

Bedding & Nesting:

<https://www.kaytee.com/all-products/small-animal/aspens-bedding>

<https://www.kaytee.com/all-products/small-animal/kaytee-bamboo-nesting-material>

<http://usa.hagen.com/Small-Animal/Bedding/Premium/61263>

<http://usa.hagen.com/Small-Animal/Bedding/Natural/61276>

Exercise:

<http://usa.hagen.com/Small-Animal/Toys/Misc./61720>

<http://usa.hagen.com/Small-Animal/Toys/Misc./61706>

Deodorizer:

<https://www.kaytee.com/all-products/small-animal/clean-cage-spray>