



Pet gerbils are small, typically white-bellied, dull brown colored rodents found in deserts in Africa, Central Asia, India and the Middle East. These mammals belong to the Rodentia order and the family Muridae and there are more than 100 known species of gerbils. The most common species of pet gerbil is the Mongolian gerbil which can grow up to 4 inches (10 cm) long, with an equal-length tail. Gerbils typically live for about 2 to 4 years in captivity and with proper care, some can live slightly longer.



HISTORY AND ORIGINS

Wild Origin:

- **Asia:** Gerbils are originally from countries like Mongolia, northern China, and parts of Central Asia. They are well adapted to the harsh desert environments of these areas.
- **Africa:** Some species are found in the dry, sandy regions of Africa, including parts of Egypt and the surrounding areas.

Domestication:

- Gerbils were first brought to the U.S. and other countries as pets in the 1950s. Their low maintenance needs, gentle nature, and interesting behaviors quickly made them popular as pets.

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SCIENTIFIC CLASSIFICATION

- **Family:** Muridae
- **Genus:** Meriones (for the Mongolian gerbil and related species)
- **Species:** Various, including *Meriones unguiculatus* (Mongolian gerbil), which is the most common pet gerbil.

BEHAVIOR AND TEMPERAMENT

- **Social:** Gerbils are gentle and social and can be housed in same-sex pairs or groups, as long as the groups are formed early in life and are stable. Don't keep males and females together unless you want babies. Gerbils breed quickly and can produce several litters per year. In captivity, if you do not want to breed them, it's best to keep males and females separated.
- **Crepuscular:** They are most active during dawn and dusk but in a classroom setting they will spend most of their day active and moving about.
- **Tameable:** With regular gentle handling, they can become quite attached to the students and enjoy being held. Hamsters also really like tubes shapes to play in



HOUSING

- **Cage Size:** Gerbils need a spacious cage, bigger is always better. Multi-level cages can also be beneficial.
- **Bedding:** Gerbils 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 gerbil can make a comfortable little bed to burrow into. Use paper-based bedding or aspen shavings. Avoid pine or cedar shavings as they can be harmful.
- **Hideouts:** Provide a small house or hideout where your gerbil can retreat and feel secure.
- **Wheel:** A solid-surface exercise wheel (minimum 7 -12 inches in diameter) is essential for exercise.
- **Chew Toys:** Gerbils need to chew to keep their teeth healthy, so provide wooden toys or untreated wooden blocks.

DIET

Gerbils are omnivores, so they can eat both plant and animal matter but you should be careful not to give them too much.

- **Gerbil Pellets:** Provides a balanced diet. They come in many shapes, but often look like small biscuits, wafers, or cereal.
- **Lab Blocks:** Gerbils 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.
- **Gerbil Mix:** Provides a high-quality gerbil 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 apple or banana. Avoid citrus fruits. Offer limited quantities.
- **Fresh Water:** Water bottles with a stainless-steel tube and roller ball are the most efficient and sanitary means of providing water to a gerbil. They are easily cleaned and the gerbil 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. Always change the water daily.

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 illness, 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.

ENRICHMENT

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

HANDLING

Holding a gerbil requires a gentle and patient approach, especially because they are small, delicate, and can be easily startled. Do not try to hold them by their tail or you may injure them.

- **Preparation:** Have the students wash their hands before they handle their gerbil. This will remove chemicals or residues that might make the gerbil nervous or cause them to bite.
- **Calm Setting:** Choose a quiet, distraction-free area for handling the gerbil to help them feel secure. Have the students sit quietly in a circle on the floor and allow the gerbil to sniff their hands before allowing them to pick the gerbil up. Have them avoid sudden movements, always have the student move slowly, quick movements can startle the gerbil and may lead to them becoming scared.
- **How to Pick Up A Gerbil:** Use both hands and gently scoop the gerbil up using both hands. Place one hand underneath the gerbil and the other over their back. Avoid grabbing too tightly or squeezing. Make sure to support the gerbil's entire body, including their legs, to make them feel safe and secure. Once the gerbil 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 gerbil for a short period of time, usually a minute or two. Watch for stress signs, if the gerbil becomes scared or begins struggling, place the gerbil back into their cage gently.
- **Exercise:** Provide the gerbil with a gerbil ball and exercise wheel in their cage. Gerbil balls and exercise wheels provide essential physical activity that helps maintain their health and well-being. Gerbils 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 Material:

<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>