



HAMSTER CARE

HANDLING AND BEHAVIOR

There are about 25 species of hamster, most of which come from southeast Europe or Asia. The most common pet hamster is the Golden or Syrian Hamster, *Mesocricetus auratus*. All pet hamsters are said to descend from three littermates caught in 1930, in Syria. The Chinese or Dwarf Hamster, *Cricetulus griseus*, is a much smaller animal, and is less often kept as a pet.

Hamsters are solitary and nocturnal. They are very sound sleepers and can be expected to be if woken suddenly and handled during the day. It is best to handle hamsters on their own schedule, in the evening or at night. They should be left to sleep during the day, if you must wake your hamster, do so gently, and be sure before you pick him up that your hands do not smell of predators", such as cats, or ferrets. Hamsters have an excellent sense of smell, but poor eyesight. They will come to recognize their owner's scent. As potential prey in the wild, they can be expected to act aggressively if frightened or startled. It is best not to pick up the hamster directly his nest. Their nocturnal habits should also be remembered when choosing a spot for the cage. A child's is not always best. They can create a surprising amount of noise when running on their wheel or drinking from a water bottle.

Young children should be supervised when handling hamsters, and should probably do so on the floor. Because a hamsters eyes are on the side of his head, he very little depth perception, and may quite easily wander off the edge of a table or flight of stairs. Exercise balls are not recommended. Whether the animal is left in the ball too long, or rolls down, or is played with another pet, exercise balls are all too often a source of injury. Wheels provide excellent exercise, solid wheels are recommended as legs can be trapped in the wires or plastic slats. Plastic edges can be surprisingly sharp and should be checked and perhaps filed in the case of new or gnawed wheels.

HOUSING

Hamsters are renowned escape artists. Be sure your cage is secure.

Hamsters should be housed alone. Although same sex littermates housed together from birth will occasionally appear to live in harmony, is not a natural situation, and eventual aggression is likely. Females tend to be dominant over and more aggressive toward males. Same sex pairs or groups of Chinese Hamsters are more likely to live successfully together than are Syrian Hamsters, providing they are together at an early age. Females can cannibalize their young if disturbed or frightened.

A wire cage with a plastic bottom is recommended. Aquaria have poor ventilation, and are not ideal. Multi-storied cages can be a cause of injury should the animal fall from an upper story, or get his tiny feet trapped between wires. Be sure that the wire spacing is not too wide, and covering the floors with heavy cardboard or plastic.

Care should be taken with modular plastic, as it is difficult to clean, ventilation is poor and should have tunnels split at the seams, legs can become and seriously injured.



Newspaper works well as bedding, and paper towel and tissue are excellent nesting material. All rodents are busy, intelligent creatures, and all will benefit from having a “project”. Provided with a roll of toilet paper, already having a small rip in it, rodents will have hours of good healthy chewing activity. At the same time, this is a “natural” behavior through which the animal builds his nest. A hide box should also be provided.

We do not recommend pine or cedar shavings, as these release essential oils, which are believed to contribute to respiratory and liver disease.

Being the clean creatures they are, hamsters will often choose one corner of the cage in which to urinate. This corner should be cleaned regularly, or more simply, a large jam jar can be placed strategically in the chosen corner. Particularly when habituated from a young age, hamsters will urinate in the “pee-jar”, which can then be changed daily. Although some feces and uneaten food should be removed, it is preferable to clean the cage entirely only every two weeks. Even so, try to replace some of the relatively clean bedding, as this minimizes the stress experienced by the hamster, which recognizes territory by scent. Changing and disinfecting the cage too rigorously may bring about territorial disputes among Dwarf Hamsters housed together.

DIET

Fresh water should be available at all times. Hamsters are omnivorous and will do best on a diet of commercial rodent pellets. Seed and grains are not a balanced diet. Either way, the diet can be supplemented with small amounts of meat, dog food, fresh fruits and vegetables. Avoid sugary treats. Scattering the food about the cage provides activity and mental stimulation for the hamster, mimicking natural behavior to a degree.

SIGNS OF ILLNESS

As potential prey animals, rodents have adapted to hiding signs of disease and pain. Close and regular observation of your hamster may bring to light subtle changes in health or behavior, which should alert you to the possibility of a problem. The following signs be seen in sick hamsters and warrant veterinary attention: increased water consumption, weight loss, difficulty eating, eyes sealed shut by discharge, or unkempt fur, swellings or sores, lameness, blood in the urine or diarrhea.

HAMSTER FACTS

	Syrian	Chinese
Adult male weight:	85-130g	30-35g
Adult female weight:	95-150g	27-32g
Average lifespan:	18-24 mos. (up to 3 yrs.)	2 1/2-3 yrs.
Age at onset of fertility:	6-8 weeks	10-14 weeks
Gestation:	15-16 days	20-21 days
Average litter size:	5-9	4-5
Weaning age:	21-28 days	21 days