



Living with Companion Hamsters



Hamsters As Pets

A golden hamster is often a child's first pet. They are small, quiet, gentle and relatively easy to care for. The name 'Golden hamster' refers to the wild-type coat colour (agouti) while 'Syrian' is used for other colour varieties. 'Teddy-bear hamsters' are members of the same species, but have long-haired coats. Their Latin name, *Mesocricetus auratus* translates to "medium-sized golden hamster".

A hamster can provide plenty of entertainment and smiles whether purchased for you or your children. Keeping a hamster as a pet can teach children responsibility and respect for other living creatures, and can remind us all that a simple life can be a happy one.

Description

There are many types of hamsters available, and all make delightful pets. They are

pleasant, charming and quite undemanding; although long-haired varieties require more attention to grooming than short-haired ones. Golden, Syrian and Teddy-bear hamsters grow to approximately 15-20 cm in length, while dwarf hamsters grow to 5-10 cm in length, depending on the breed. Other breeds that are commonly seen include the Siberian and the Chinese (striped) hamster.

Hamsters have cheek pouches that are quite large. They reach from the corners of the mouth all the way to the shoulder blades and are used to carry large amounts of food or bedding material back to the hamster's den. Domestic hamsters retain this instinct and will often attempt to empty their food bowl and hide it at another spot in the cage. When full, the cheek pouches appear drastically enlarged and you can feel the texture of the food pellets or bedding material through the skin of the cheeks.

Like all rodents, hamsters have "open-rooted" incisor teeth that continue to grow throughout their lives. The hamster should be provided roughage to gnaw on to prevent their incisors from overgrowing. Normal wear and tear from opening seeds and nuts or chewing their pelleted feed usually keeps their teeth trim, however mineral blocks, wood or crunchy dog biscuits may be

given occasionally for the hamster to chew.

Adult hamsters live solitary lives and will fight ferociously with others. They should never be housed with other hamsters as their territorial aggression can result in severe injuries to one another.

Hamsters have 4 front toes and 5 rear toes. They have two scent glands on their backs, which are much more apparent on males than on females. Hamsters can be sexed by comparing the distance from the genital opening to the anus. The distance on males is 1-2 cm while on females they are very close together. Adult males also have a more elongated posterior than females do.

Hamsters often pick a favourite corner of their cage to relieve themselves. Hamster urine is milky white and it is normal to find a white stain on the cage bottom that is very difficult to remove. Washing the area lightly with soap and water is sufficient to eliminate odour. It is not necessary to scrub off the white stain.

The normal lifespan for a hamster is 18-24 months. Proper care and attention will ensure that your hamster will live a happy and healthy life.



Hamster-Proofing

Hamsters are able to flatten their bodies considerably, and can fit through amazingly tiny holes. Anything a hamster can fit its head through can be a potential escape route. It is best to play with your hamster in a sparsely furnished room with few objects that he can fit under, or in. Hamsters may climb inside a piano or a sofa and be difficult to retrieve. If no such room exists, a child's empty wading pool, or some similar arrangement can be used to confine the hamster. Clear plastic exercise balls can be bought that you can place the hamster in to allow him to run throughout your home. Stairways however, should be blocked off to prevent a fall and you should never leave the hamster in the ball for more than 20 minutes. The intense exercise and lack of water may lead to exhaustion, hyperthermia and dehydration.

Hamsters love to explore underneath furniture and rugs. It is important to note where the hamster is at all times when he is loose to avoid losing him, or accidentally stepping on him. If a hamster does become lost, placing a handful of bedding from his cage in a quiet dark corner (perhaps on the floor of a closet) along with some hamster food will usually attract him to this spot.

Be mindful of any possible use of rodenticides around your home. If poison baits have been placed for mouse control, your hamster

(or other pets) may encounter them and be poisoned themselves. If you suspect that this has happened, estimate the amount that your pet has eaten, and rush your pet as well as the package the poison came in to a veterinarian immediately.

Training and Handling

It is best to bring home a young hamster. Upon introduction to a new home, a hamster should be given a few days of peace and quiet to become accustomed to the new smells and activities. After this adjustment time, the hamster can be picked up gently and slowly, never lifting him more than a foot above the floor in case he wriggles free and falls from your hands. Be especially hushed, slow and gentle during your first few interactions to reassure the hamster that he is safe. "Kissing sounds" tend to frighten hamsters so resist the urge to smooch your fluffy little friend.

When sleeping, a hamster is easily startled and may be inclined to bite defensively. Shuffling your fingers in the shavings will wake the hamster and then he will permit handling. Be sure to wash any food scents off your hands before handling your hamster to avoid an accidental nip.

A well socialized hamster will allow anyone to handle him, he will be secure and less likely to startle at unfamiliar sounds. He will learn to anticipate play-time

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and often will climb eagerly into his exercise ball for a run. Some hamsters can even be taught to perform simple natural behaviours for a food-treat reward.

Housing

The bigger the cage the better, but it should be no smaller than 120 square inches. It should have bars no more than a half inch apart and should be lined with paper or wood chip bedding. Hamsters enjoy running in an exercise wheel and empty paper towel tubes or tree branches can be left in the cage to provide surfaces to climb on, or hide in.

Modular plastic tubing can be purchased from pet stores to create tunnels that branch off the hamster's cage that he can explore on his own. One mistake people sometimes make though is to build tall vertical drops that can injure a hamster if it loses its footing and falls through the tubing. Never stack the tubes vertically more than a few inches; instead make only gradual inclines.

Diet

Hamster seed mixes are available at pet and grocery stores. Unfortunately, picky eaters may select only the tastiest seeds resulting in an unbalanced diet; therefore a pelleted hamster food is the best choice. It should contain at least 16% protein and 5% fat.

They usually accept a broad range of treats, but it is best to provide dry breakfast cereals, fresh fruit and vegetables. Only rarely should a hamster ever get treats like peanut butter or cheese.

Water should be available at all times. A hanging bottle is a good choice, but must be checked regularly to be sure that it is not clogged. A water dish can be used, but it must be changed daily to remove debris.

Health

Abnormal wear on the continuously growing incisors can lead to a problem known as malocclusion where the teeth fail to meet and will begin to overgrow. This will lead to difficulties eating, and eventually the teeth will puncture the roof of the mouth or lips. If this is not noticed and treated early, the angle of the root of the teeth may become irreversibly altered and the hamster could require monthly teeth trims for the rest of its life. For this reason it is important to provide gnawing materials like mineral blocks or wood.

Hamsters are susceptible to several species bacteria that can cause diarrhea. This is often referred to as 'Wet-tail' and can quickly lead to dehydration; therefore it is important to contact your veterinarian if this is suspected. Some of the bacteria that cause diarrhea in hamsters can infect humans as well, so

extra attention should be paid to hand-washing if you suspect that your hamster is sick.

Cardiomyopathy is a disease of the heart that is seen in hamsters. If he becomes lethargic with an increased respiratory rate and tires easily, heart disease may be suspected. Hamsters over one year old are known to develop a kidney disease called Amyloidosis. This is often associated with increased quantity and odour of urine.

A hamster's cheek pouches may sometimes become impacted, especially if the hamster's incisors have overgrown. This can lead to infection, so if you have noticed that your hamster has not emptied one or both of his cheek pouches after a few days he should receive veterinary attention.

Hamsters and Other Animals

Hamsters are a natural "prey" animal. Dogs that have been bred for rodent control and most cats may not be able to resist the instinct to attack a hamster. As well, the hamster's aggression and territoriality requires that it live singly in its own cage. It is therefore safest to avoid introducing a hamster to any other pet.





Before you Make the Commitment...

- ✓ Hamsters may require medical care. Have you planned in your budget for emergencies?
- ✓ If you rent, have you checked to be sure you will be allowed to keep a hamster?
- ✓ What will you do with your hamster during vacation time?
- ✓ Hamsters generally live to be 2 years old. Are you prepared for this commitment?
- ✓ Young children should not be left unsupervised with hamsters. Do you have the time to spend with the children and their pet? Will you teach them to handle the small animal gently and carefully?

- ✓ Do you have other pets to consider before taking a hamster home?
- ✓ Are there allergies in your family?
- ✓ Will a hamster fit into your home and lifestyle?

Checklist

Housing

- Roomy cage
- Exercise wheel
- Food bowl
- Water bottle or bowl
- Exercise ball
- Hamster-proofed play/exercise area

Food

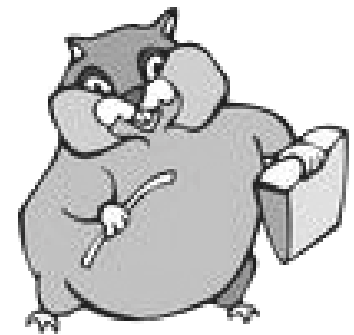
- High quality pelleted rodent food
- Mineral blocks or other gnawing surfaces
- Breakfast cereals (for treats and training)

Supplies

- Wood chips or shredded paper bedding
- Shredded paper towel for a soft sleeping corner
- Cardboard tubes to hide in and explore
- Good book on hamster care
- A small soft brush for long-haired hamsters

Vet Care and More

- Emergency medical care
- Vacation care



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