

Gerbils

Are you considering a guinea pig as a companion? Here is some information to get you started.

Gerbils are medium-maintenance pets. After initial start-up costs, expect to spend approximately \$200-400 each year for a single, healthy gerbil. The average lifespan for a gerbil is 3-5 years. Gerbils need the opportunity to socialize and exercise outside of their cage for at least 30-60 minutes every day. Lastly, their diet and housing require daily maintenance. Follow these guidelines for basic gerbil husbandry to ensure your pet is a happy and healthy member of your family!



Basic Care

Housing

The minimum recommended cage size is 24”L x 12”W x 24”H , with at least 6” of burrowing space. The best housing is an aquarium with custom metal cage toppers. This provides room to run, climb, dig extensively, forage, and hide. There must also be space for food, water, and possibly a litter box. To keep your gerbil engaged and happy, provide plenty of environmental enrichment, such as a dust bath, wheel, foraging activities, toys, ladders and tunnels. Toilet paper rolls are a favourite!

Food & Water

Gerbils are omnivores and should consume about a tablespoon of food per day. A healthy diet consists of:

- Rodent Block/Pellets: this is their dietary staple. Avoid pellet/seed blends.
- Supplement rodent block with fruit, vegetables, dried fruits and a variety of seeds and nuts.
- Common toxic foods include coffee, chocolate, potatoes, green beans, avocados, blue cheese, red cabbage, green bananas, brussel sprouts, artichokes, rhubarb, soda and orange juice.

Water: Water can be served in a bowl or bottle, as per your gerbil’s preference. In either case, be sure to provide fresh water daily. In the case of using bottles, be sure to monitor usage to make sure your pet is staying healthy and hydrated. Ultimately water bowls are easier to regularly clean as well as more easily accessible to your pet.

Bedding

Use Aspen wood shavings, recycled newspaper beddings, or hemp bedding. Never use pelleted beddings, pine or cedar shavings, corn cob bedding, regular newspaper, or clay/clumping kitty litter, as these products are toxic to gerbils if ingested.

Grooming

Gerbils keep themselves clean and healthy by using dust baths, so they generally do not need water baths. Dust baths and dust can be purchased at most pet stores. Dust baths should only be provided for a few hours at a time and never overnight to reduce inhalation of dust.

House-proofing

Be sure to provide your gerbil with safe food and toys and keep them away from potential hazards such as wires and cords around the house.

Allergies?

If you or a member of your household suffers from seasonal allergies, you might be allergic to the bedding gerbils use. If you think you might be affected, spend some time around these products prior to adopting.

Health Care

Veterinary Care

Veterinary costs can be more expensive than that of cats and dogs because gerbils are considered an exotic species and must be treated by a qualified exotics veterinarian. They should see the vet for yearly exams or whenever a health concern arises. Prior to Adopting: Find a gerbil-savvy veterinarian in your area and inquire about their prices for check-ups and common medical care.

Common Health Concerns

Since gerbils are prey animals, they tend to hide their illnesses. Therefore, if you notice any change in behaviour, consult your veterinarian immediately. Gerbils' teeth grow continuously and can become misaligned or overgrown if not provided with sufficient chewing materials. Gerbils are also susceptible to tumours, ear infections, and tail injuries, as well as seizures when stressed.

Gerbil Behaviour

Psychology

As prey animals, gerbils are at the bottom of the food chain: everything can eat them, and they are never safe. This dramatically shapes the way they see the world. Gerbils need to feel safe and secure, have spots for hiding, and are most comfortable with all 4 feet planted safely on a steady surface.

Bonding with your Gerbil

Be gentle when interacting with your pet gerbil: this will build the trust necessary for a happy relationship. Gerbils are very social, active, playful, and curious creatures. The most important thing to do to keep your pet happy and healthy is to spend time with him/her every day and provide plenty of toys. Like with people, gerbils' personalities can vary; some can be shy or outgoing, sweet or grumpy, placid or playful.

Get to know your gerbil's personality and treat it accordingly: for instance, shy gerbils will need more socialization and patience in order to feel comfortable around people.

One or Two?

Gerbils are colony animals and are therefore naturally social. They form very strong bonds with each other, so housing two or more gerbils together is highly recommended. Once bonds are formed, they should not be broken. If you would like to try to bond two unfamiliar gerbils, consult one of the many resources available first. Bonding unfamiliar gerbils can be tricky and must be approached with caution.

Handling

Being small and fast, gerbils can be difficult to catch and handle. Secure a gerbil's entire body gently and be sure to put a struggling gerbil down; falls can cause serious injury. Gerbils should never be grabbed or held by the tail, as they are prone to fur slip, a painful condition in which the skin and fur rip off their tails.

How do gerbils see the world?

Gerbils have a much different field of vision than other rodents. They rely on being able to spot predators from all angles but also need some depth perception to hunt the insects that make up a portion of their natural diet. Gerbils are able to perceive greens and some blues, but not reds. They also have well-developed senses of smell, hearing, and touch and use these to supplement navigation and predator aversion, as well as to find food and communicating with each other.

Origins

Wild gerbils consist of 110 species which reside throughout Africa, India, and Asia. Domesticated gerbils are the descendants of the Mongolian gerbil, or Clawed Jird, and were first kept as pets by Western Europeans in the 19th century.

Understanding Gerbil Behaviour:

- Digging compulsively in a corner: A behaviour that develops into a compulsion if gerbils have been raised in an environment with little or no burrowing opportunity
- Licking the side of the aquarium: Generally signals the gerbil is thirsty. Water supply should be checked.
- Eye Winking: Indicates pleasure, as when eating a favourite treat. It can also indicate submission to other gerbils higher in the hierarchy.

- Kissing: Gerbils kiss when they first meet. It is thought that they transmit messages such as gender and dominance through chemicals in the saliva.
- Moving head from side to side: Seen in ruby-eyed gerbils. It is thought to make up for the distortion in their vision.
- Foot Thump: Warns of danger to other gerbils. It can also be a precursor to mating.