

Hamsters

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

Hamsters are medium-maintenance pets. After initial startup costs, expect to spend approximately \$200- 400 each year for a single, healthy hamster. The average lifespan for a hamster is 2-3 years. Hamsters need the opportunity to socialize and exercise outside of their cage for at least 30 minutes every day. Lastly, their diet and housing require daily maintenance. Follow these guidelines for basic hamster husbandry to ensure your pet is a happy and healthy member of your family!



Basic Care

Housing

The minimum recommended cage size is 30”L x 18”W x 24”, with at least 6” of burrowing space. Dwarf hamsters require smaller bar spacing to prevent escapes. The best housing is an aquarium with custom metal cage toppers. This provides room to burrow, run, climb, dig extensively, and hide. There must also be space for food, water, and possibly a litter box. To keep your hamster engaged and happy, provide environmental enrichment, such as a wheel, foraging activities, toys, ladders, and tunnels.

Food & Water

Hamsters are omnivores and naturally hoard their food in several hiding spots in a cage. A healthy diet consists of:

- Rodent Block/Pellets: this is their dietary staple. Avoid pellet/seed blends.
- Fresh fruits and veggies: 1-2 teaspoons daily. Citrus fruits are acidic and may irritate a hamster’s mouth and cheek pouches, so they should be avoided.
- Treats: Nuts and produce high in sugars can be served as treats occasionally.
- Common toxic foods include coffee, chocolate, potatoes, raw beans, avocados, blue cheese, red cabbage, green bananas, brussel sprouts, artichokes, rhubarb and soda. Water: Use water bowls and provide fresh water daily. Bowls are easy for you to clean regularly as well as provide the hamster with easy access to a consistent water supply.

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 hamsters if ingested.

Grooming

Hamsters clean themselves on their own, so baths should generally be avoided. Long-haired hamsters can develop mats in their hair, and they need to be carefully trimmed out. Brushing regularly helps prevent matting. Dwarf hamsters benefit from occasional dust baths with chinchilla dust. Ensure you do not leave the bath in the cage overnight to prevent excessive inhalation of dust, which can damage the respiratory system.

House-proofing

Hamsters do not have the ability to vomit, so anything they ingest must pass through their entire system. Be sure to provide your hamster with safe food and toys and keep them away from potential hazards such as wires and cords around the house.

Allergies?

Some people are allergic to the bedding hamsters use. If you think you might be affected, spend some time around these products prior to adopting.

Health Care

Veterinary Care

Veterinary costs are not generally high, but some procedures can be more expensive than for cats and dogs because hamsters are considered an exotic species. They must be treated by a qualified small-domestics veterinarian. While hamsters do not require vaccinations, they should see the vet yearly for a check-up or whenever a health concern arises. Before adopting, find a hamster-savvy veterinarian in your area and inquire about their prices for check-ups and other common procedures.

Common Medical Concerns

Since hamsters are prey animals, they tend to hide their illnesses to avoid being targeted by predators. Consult a qualified veterinarian if you notice any concerning changes in your hamster's appearance or behaviour. Respiratory infections and abscesses are common and should be treated immediately. If the temperature in your hamster's habitat drops, they may enter a hibernation-like state and may appear to be dying or dead. In such cases, slowly warming them up and seeing a vet immediately will help prevent fatalities. Care should be taken to avoid sudden or drastic changes in the hamster's environment.

Hamster Behaviour

Psychology

Since hamsters are prey animals, they 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. Hamsters need to feel safe and secure, have spots for hiding, and have a calm, quiet environment.

Handling

Their small size can make them squirmy and difficult to handle. Use both hands to pick up a hamster securely. Dropping a hamster can cause serious injury. So, if a hamster is struggling, put it down.

Bonding with your Hamster

Be gentle when interacting with your hamster: this will build the trust necessary for a happy relationship. If your hamster is particularly timid, take things slow and use treats to build up trust. Let your hamster smell you and come to you. Hamsters tend to be most active at night, so try to interact with them when they are naturally active. They might be grumpy if woken from a deep sleep! The most important thing to keep your pet happy and healthy is to spend time with him/her every day and provide plenty of toys. Hamsters can become fearful of people if not socialized daily.

One or Two?

Syrian hamsters are solitary animals and will fight, often to death, if housed together in adulthood, even if they're a mating pair. For this reason, they should be housed alone. Dwarf hamsters can live in same-sex pairs or groups with siblings or parents. Still, care should be taken if attempting to introduce two unfamiliar adults, and this is usually not recommended.

How do hamsters see the world?

Hamsters have poor eyesight. To a hamster, everything is a blur of light and dark. However, they have an acute sense of smell and navigate primarily through scent and touch. They identify each other and their caregivers through scent and sound. They have a keen sense of hearing and are particularly sensitive to high-pitched noises, communicating with other hamsters in an ultrasonic range.

Origins

Domesticated Syrian Hamsters are descendants of the wild Golden Hamster from Syria. Hamsters are a very recent introduction to the world of pets - it wasn't until 1930 that the first domestic Syrian hamsters were bred. In the wild, hamsters will travel up to 13 km in one night in search of food to store in their burrows.

Understanding Hamster Vocalizations

- Squeaking: Fear/agitation. Often occurs when a hamster is put in a new environment.
- Teeth grinding/chattering: Irritation. The hamster wants to be left alone. May be a warning before a bite.
- Hissing: Usually with mouth wide open, teeth showing, front paws raised. May be crouching or lying on back. Indicates the hamster is very upset or frightened. If you persist, it will likely bite.