

SMALL PETS 14

Enrichment for small pets



The charity dedicated to helping sick, injured and homeless pets since 1897.



Enrichments for small pets

Small pets can be so much fun but how can you make sure that they're enjoying themselves too? As well as always ensuring they have large, spacious homes, there are lots of things you can do to enrich your pet's environment and help keep them stimulated and happy.

Rabbits

A happy bunny is one that can display its natural behaviour and you can find ways to help them do this. They need to be able to hop, stretch and play and because rabbits live together in the wild it's important to keep them in a pair or compatible group otherwise they're likely to get very depressed. Make sure your rabbits are neutered – this is important even if they're in a same-sex group to avoid them fighting.

Rabbits' favourite things include climbing, tunnelling and digging and their instinct is to run and hide if they sense danger. There are lots of things you can do to allow them to do this. Make sure they have plenty of space and a private compartment so they can get a bit of privacy. Give them tubes to run through and hide in and a cardboard box, filled with shredded paper and with an entrance and an exit they can hop in and out of. They love a good piece of dirt that they can burrow into so they'll really appreciate a digging pit.

Did you know that rabbits spend 70 per cent of their waking hours feeding? You can make this fun by encouraging them to forage – hang some root vegetables on a string for them to nibble and scatter their food to encourage them to search for it. You can also put their hay in hanging baskets which they can reach up and nibble at like they would do in the wild.

You can give your rabbit safe things to chew, like apple wood or willow, or buy edible wooden chews from a good pet supplier.

Guinea pigs

Guinea pigs are curious critters and love to watch what's going on around them. As well as a roomy indoor hutch they also need an outdoor run so they can have a bit of a nose and a good graze. Because they're quite shy they always need something to hide in when they're out in their run in case they get scared. Cardboard boxes, tubes or pipes are





great for this and also lots of fun. They enjoy running free indoors too – make sure they're supervised and there are no escape holes!

Guinea pigs aren't actually big fans of toys as a rule but hiding small amounts of food for them to search for can also keep them entertained.

Guinea pigs love company of their own kind but not of others, like rabbits, so keep them in a same-sex or neutered pair or small group.

Hamsters

While you're busy enriching your life during the day, most hamsters are snoozing happily but at night-time they're ready for action. They need lots of exercise and are well-known for merrily running on their wheels but don't get one with spokes because it can cause an injury. Instead, get a solid, wide wheel. People think they like exercise balls but they are really exhausting for

hamsters and there's no way of escape for them, so it's actually more stressful than fun.

You'll have a happy hamster if you give them cardboard tubes to run through and chew and they love to climb so wooden ledges will definitely go down well. They also adore rolling around in a sand bath – you can get special sand for this from pet shops.

Some hamsters love to live with their pals while others are quite the opposite so make sure you know what type yours is. A Syrian hamster is happy on its own and will fight with another one. But dwarf hamsters like company and can be kept in same-sex pairs or small groups.



Gerbils

Gerbils are happiest when they're hanging out in tunnels, like they do in the wild. So make sure they have lots of material to dig and tunnel to their heart's content, like dust-extracted bedding, dried peat moss or a mixture of the two. The thicker the better as far as they're concerned. You can create a tunnel-environment by giving them cardboard tubes, like finished toilet rolls, which they'll have a whale of a time running through and chewing.

Gerbils quite like to see what's going on so if you put a flat rock in the tank, you may find they use it as a lookout point. They also love climbing on fruit tree branches. They enjoy having a good roll around so a sand bath using special sand, which you can get from pet shops, will be popular. Gerbils are very sociable and would be unhappy on their own so make sure they've got at least one gerbil pal or live in a group of the same sex.



Rats

Rats are busy bees and they're happiest when they're on the go. They look forward to play-time so it's important that you give them at least an hour outside their cage every day so they can stretch their legs and do some serious exploring (make sure the room is safe and rat-proof first though – rats are also skilled escape artists!).

Some rats love toys, like pieces of plastic drainpipe or cardboard boxes so try it out and see what they think. They might fancy themselves as a bit of a hamster and enjoy running on a wheel too but make sure you avoid one with spokes as they can cause a serious injury – get a solid, wide wheel instead.

Just like most of the small pets, rats are very sociable and live in groups so keep them in a same-sex pair or group.





Mice

Mice love anything that they can climb so lengths of rope suspended from the top of their tank or fruit tree branches will be a big hit. They like going through tunnels so give them some plastic or cardboard tubes to explore. You'll also be popular if you half fill a cardboard box with compost and let the mice have supervised tunnelling sessions.

Mice love company of their own kind and are happiest when kept in same-sex groups, ideally from the same litter to prevent fights.

Degus

Degus are very active and they need lots of enrichment to keep them happy. Exercise wheels will help them to get the daily exercise they need and wooden branches are brilliant because they're three fun things in one – an obstacle course, more levels to climb on and something tasty to chew. Safe woods to use include apple, hazelnut and hawthorn.

Degus need a supply of hay but you can make it fun for them by filling up a box and letting them forage for it. Grass boxes are also great fun for degus and a natural way for them to forage. They love to dig so they'll love it if you make them their own digging box using organic soil and sand. Degus like to have a sand bath every day and after they've been handled, using special sand that you can get from pet shops.





Other great ways to keep degus entertained are a treatball, which is both fun and great exercise, and toys like jingly balls, sisal and corn toys. A solid exercise wheel, 25cm in diameter will help them exercise and clay piping can also provide a tunnelling system for them to explore.

Like most of their small pet cousins, degus are very sociable so they should never be kept alone as this can make them very stressed. They should live in same-sex groups.



Chinchillas

Like hamsters, chinchillas are nocturnal so while you're playing, they're snoring. But once the early evening sets in they'll be feeling sprightly so this is a great time to let them out for a run – make sure they're supervised as they are natural explorers and love a nibble, especially electrical wires. Chinchillas are really active so they need plenty of space and as much supervised exercise as possible. They also love shelves at different heights.

In the wild chinchillas use fine sand to keep their coats clean so offer them a dust bath for 20 minutes every day using special chinchilla dust which is large and deep enough for them to have fun rolling around without getting injured.

Chinchillas also need company of their own kind and will be much happier with a playmate and someone to snuggle up to.

Happy, healthy pets

Blue Cross advice leaflets are packed full of top tips to help owners with their pet questions. They cover a wide range of topics, from training a puppy to caring for an older cat. So if you need some support to help you with a pet problem, whether it's about a dog or a degu, we're here for you.

You can read and download our leaflets online at www.bluecross.org.uk

Visit our website to take advantage of all its features, including:

- blog posts from Blue Cross experts
- latest news
- events near you
- pets needing new homes

Or you can join in the chat on our online communities. Find us on Twitter and Facebook – just search for Blue Cross.



Blue Cross

Blue Cross has been dedicated to the health and happiness of pets since 1897. Abandoned or unwanted, ill or injured – we do what's needed to give every pet a healthy life in a happy home. We're a charity, so the more help you give us, the more help we can give pets.

How you can help

Blue Cross doesn't receive any government funding, so we rely on the generosity of pet lovers like you. There are lots of ways you can help the sick, injured and abandoned pets in our care, like making a donation, fundraising for us or leaving us a legacy.

Please call us on 0300 777 1897 or visit www.bluecross.org.uk



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