



CARING FOR YOUR GERBIL

ABOUT GERBILS

The term “gerbils” describes nearly 100 species of rodents found in Africa and Asia. The most common breed of pet gerbil is the Mongolian gerbil. This species usually weighs 4-5 ounces and will grow to just under 6 inches long. Mongolian gerbils tend to be “agouti” in color, meaning golden brown with black-tipped fur, and sport a long-furred tail with a tuft of fur at the end. However, gerbils come in a variety of colors including black, albino, cream, piebald and more!

They have scent glands on their stomach which they can be seen rubbing up against various items in their habitat to mark their territory. Gerbils have elongated front and hind legs, enabling them to be very skillful jumpers. The combination of large hind feet and long tail enables gerbils to balance themselves as they stand upright.

Gerbils love to play with one another, boxing, wrestling, and chasing each other around when they are not piled up sleeping together. They are highly social colony animals which can become depressed when left alone. So, unless you have some compelling reason not to, gerbils should always be adopted in same-gender pairs. Caution should be taken if trying to introduce gerbils that were not raised together as serious fights could occur.

HANDLING

Before you handle your gerbil, it is recommended that you let your pet become accustomed to your scent. Try putting your hand in the habitat with your fist balled (making a fist helps your pet not mistake your fingers for food), then let your furry friend come to you. Repeat this a few times until your gerbil becomes used to your scent.

Once your pet is comfortable with your scent, extend the palm of your hand into their home, with a tasty treat like a raisin or a piece of cheese. Soon, your gerbil will be coming up and taking treats right from your hand. After some time, your gerbil will associate your scent with something good and no coaxing will be needed to hold your pet. You can scoop them up from the side and gently cup your hands around them.

Always speak to your gerbil in a soothing tone of voice. Anytime you’re handling or feeding your pet, be calm and patient.

When taking gerbils out of a habitat, remember that they’re quick jumpers, so be careful. Never pick your gerbil up by its tail as doing so can cause a serious degloving injury. Also, make sure that you’re in a room with closed doors, so that if your pet does escape, it won’t be able to go far. It’s never recommended to take your gerbil outside.

GROOMING/CLEANING

Gerbils are extremely clean animals. They will continually groom themselves and any roommate gerbils around. They should be given a dust bath with a commercial small animal dust at least once a week. The dust will absorb oils from their skin resulting in a healthy coat.

HABITAT

Gerbils are active and need plenty of space to run, climb, and explore. Gerbils housed in enclosures that are too small can often become aggressive and temperamental. Provide the largest habitat possible, preferably one with multiple levels or tubes to explore. One or two gerbils require an area that measures at least 18 inches wide, 24 to 30 inches long and 12 inches high. There are a variety of small animal habitats available. Some habitats have a plastic base topped with a rigid snap-on wire cover, while others have both a plastic base and a plastic top. Wire habitats are not usually recommended because gerbils are natural burrowers. The wire can cause injury to their noses as they instinctively dig. Their tendency to dig will often cause shavings to be thrown from the habitat.

As gerbils are voracious chewers, some owners prefer a 15-gallon tank (or larger). If you decide to use a tank as your gerbil's home, tank toppers can make your gerbil's home more spacious. Always make sure the top to your habitat is secure to prevent escape.

An exercise wheel is important for your pet. Choose a wheel about 7 inches in diameter, and one that is enclosed and without open spaces between the rungs. Wheels can be purchased separately and attached to a habitat or purchased as standalones. Many modern habitats also have safe exercise wheels already mounted inside.

Other exercise accessories include:

- plastic see-through gerbil balls that come apart; make sure your gerbil's ball is well-ventilated so they don't become overheated.
- miniature cars that operate on gerbil power.
- towers, platforms, ladders, slides, and spinners provide great running and climbing exercise options

Supervision is strongly suggested when using these devices if dogs and cats or small children are in the house.

WATER AND FOOD

The bulk of your gerbil's diet should consist of high-quality pelleted gerbil food. You can supplement its diet with no more than 10% grains, vegetables, and fruits to give your gerbil variety. Fresh food and clean, chlorine-free water that is changed daily should always be available to your pet gerbil.

Commercial brands of pelleted gerbil food are specially formulated to provide the proper balanced nutrition with the ideal daily dosage of vitamins and minerals, plus all the other essential nutrients. Choose pellets that have been veterinarian tested and approved.

Grains are the best source of protein and carbohydrates and can be found in commercially prepared gerbil food and treats.

Vegetables and fruits such as fresh romaine lettuce, dandelion greens, carrot tops, broccoli spears, spinach, artichokes, and any other dark, green veggies should be part of the daily diet to provide vitamins and minerals beneficial to your gerbil's health, however they should not exceed 10% of their daily intake. Gerbils love apples, pears, strawberries, and bananas, which can be offered by hand to increase bonding opportunities.

Thoroughly wash all vegetables and fruits to remove any possible dirt or pesticide residue. Any fruits or vegetables that are not eaten within 24 hours should be discarded.

Steer away from fatty nuts, such as peanuts and sunflower seeds, which can promote obesity. Dog biscuits, mealworms, cooked chicken, or yogurt can be offered on occasion.

Keep your gerbil's teeth in good condition by providing chew sticks or gnawing foods such as hay or alfalfa cubes.

KEEPING YOUR GERBIL HEALTHY

Maintaining a clean habitat with the appropriate exercise devices and toys, along with a balanced diet, will go a long way toward keeping your pet in good health. Carefully observe your gerbil on regular basis, using the following checklist to tell if your pet is healthy:

- A healthy gerbil should have a tail as long as its body, with a burst of soft fur at the end. A healthy gerbil should also have a well-formed, stocky body.
- A healthy gerbil's nose should be clean and free from any scabs or discharge. Avoid gerbils that have sore, red, or bleeding noses. This could be an indication of infection or an allergy cause by their bedding.
- Dry or ruffled fur, and runny or dull eyes signal a sick gerbil.
- Sometimes a healthy gerbil will seem depressed if they have been alone for too long. Give your gerbil a chance to perk up once you get it. If all other signs point to a healthy gerbil, odds are it's just lonely.

Arrange a visit to the veterinarian as soon as possible after picking up your new gerbil. The veterinarian will check and make sure your little one is healthy and can answer any other questions you might have.

AVOIDING HUMAN ILLNESS

Gerbils rarely carry diseases that can be transmitted to humans. Regardless, these simple precautions can help prevent the risk of infection:

1. Closely supervise children and make sure they wash their hands with soap and water after handling small animals, their habitats or anything in their habitats.
2. As cute and cuddly as they are, do not kiss small animals. Illnesses are sometimes spread this way.
3. Never use food-preparation areas to clean small animal habitats or anything in their habitats. If you clean the habitat in the bathroom, disinfect the area completely afterwards.
4. Clean the habitat, food, and water bowls in a well-ventilated area.

Children younger than 5 years old, people with weakened immune systems, and people 65 years of age and older are more likely to get diseases spread between animals and people (also known as zoonotic diseases); contact your health care provider for more information.

This information is designed as a basic guide. There are several books and online resources available which provide in-depth information on gerbils and their care. Contact your veterinarian for additional information.