



CARING FOR YOUR HAMSTER

ABOUT HAMSTERS

Hamsters were first discovered in Syria in the early 1800s; their range extends from the Middle East to the Steppes in Russia. The most popular types of hamsters are Syrians, Russian Dwarfs, Chinese Dwarfs, Roborovski (referred to as Robos) and Djungarian (referred to as DJs).

This small, playful rodent is one of the most popular introductory pets in the United States. Hamsters are by nature clean and easy to keep. They eat little, are readily available, and are inexpensive. Hamsters have poor eyesight, relying mostly on their sense of smell and a keen sense of hearing. They rub their scent glands on objects, creating trails they can follow.

HANDLING

Tamed hamsters don't mind being handled if you pick them up around their middle with one hand and place them in the palm of your other hand. You should form a little cave with your hands when handling your hamster. This can prevent not-so-tame hamsters from running away.

Hamsters are solitary foraging animals by nature and need a spacious cage as well as places in it to hide, particularly if you have more than one hamster in the enclosure. Giving your hamster an outlet for their energy is important to their physical and mental wellbeing. Some hamster cages have built-in tunnels, climbing tubes and exercise wheels along with a food dish and water bottle. An appropriately sized hamster ball or small animal playpen are other ways your hamster can get exercise outside of their habitat.

Regularly clean your hamster's habitat. Your hamster will tend to urinate in one or two corners of its habitat, making it easy to litter box train them. Scoop out the wet bedding or litter every day and replace with fresh bedding/litter. Change your hamster's bedding once a week. Be sure to also remove any food your hamster may have stored.

Clean your hamster's habitat thoroughly once a month. Wash the habitat with a pet-safe cleaner or lukewarm soapy water and be sure to avoid ammonia-based products. Thoroughly rinse with water to remove any residue. Make sure the habitat is completely dry and all smells have dissipated before adding fresh bedding.

GROOMING

Most hamsters don't need to be brushed, as they groom themselves. However, if you have a Long-Haired Syrian hamster, also known as the Teddy Bear Hamster, your pet could use a weekly brushing to help remove wood shavings, food, and dirt from her coat. You can use a special small animal comb, or even a soft, fine toothbrush.

Hamsters don't usually need to have their claws trimmed. However, if your pet scratches itself while self-grooming or its nails are starting to curl beneath its feet, you may need to see a veterinarian.

Your hamster's teeth will likely be brownish-white or yellow. Because their teeth never stop growing, hamsters need a chew toy, chew stick or mineral chew available at all times to wear down their incisors. If your hamster's teeth become overgrown, or you see a broken or chipped tooth, take your pet to the veterinarian as soon as possible.

Some hamsters, especially dwarf species, like to take dust baths to help remove oils from their fur. Provide a small dish of small animal dust weekly for your hamster to dig and roll around in. Leave the dust bath in for a few hours, but no more than 12. Hairless hamsters can benefit from a small amount of non-toxic aloe-based lotion rubbed into their skin to help keep it soft. Hamsters rarely need baths, but if you feel it needs one, spot-clean your pet using a damp lukewarm washcloth or unscented baby wipe. Keep your hamster out of drafts while it dries.

WATER AND FOOD

For the most part, hamsters do not require a lot of different types of foods. A mixture of high-quality hamster food (pelleted food, or cube), grains and fresh fruits and vegetables will meet your pet's nutritional needs. Do not make a dramatic change to your hamster's diet (pellet or cube), which could stress your pet and cause it to develop wet tail. Your hamster will not overeat, so be sure to keep its food bowl filled at all times with a well-balanced hamster diet that is specially formulated to provide balanced nutrition with the ideal daily dosage of vitamins and minerals, plus all the other essential nutrients.

Once your new pet is settled in after a week or two, you can supplement its diet with a limited (no more than 10% of her total daily food intake) amount of:

- Grains are the primary food for hamsters providing protein and carbohydrates. You should provide approximately a tablespoonful daily, from a prepared hamster mixture. Fatty nuts (peanuts and sunflower seeds) promote obesity and should be only a small part of the mixture.
- Fresh, organically grown greens (such as Romaine lettuce, dandelion greens, carrot tops, broccoli spears, spinach, artichokes, and any other dark green veggies) are great choices. Avoid iceberg lettuce and other veggies or fruits (like watermelon) high in water content as they can cause diarrhea. Remember to wash the vegetables thoroughly to remove traces of harmful pesticides.
- Hamsters love fruits including apples, pears, strawberries, and bananas. Fruits should be provided in moderation as a supplement to the regular diet. Remember to wash the fruits and vegetables thoroughly to remove traces of harmful pesticides. Remove any vegetables or fruits not eaten within 24 hours.
- Grass hay such as timothy is a great gnawing food that can help keep your hamster's teeth in good condition while providing fiber.

Provide your pet with clean, fresh, chlorine-free water, changed daily.

Reward your hamster with its favorite hamster treats, but they should not exceed 10% of their daily diet.

Do not feed your hamster chocolate, caffeine, or alcohol, as these can cause serious medical conditions. Avoid sugar and treats with a high fat content.

KEEPING YOUR HAMSTER HEALTHY

A clean habitat and the proper diet will go a long way toward helping to keep your pet healthy. A healthy hamster should have:

- A smooth, shiny coat.
- No hair loss.
- A symmetrical body with no lumps.
- A clean anus.
- Clear eyes without any discharge.
- A dry nose.
- A steady gate.
- Teeth that are not overgrown.
- A lively disposition.

An unhealthy hamster will display:

- Rumpled or dull fur.
- Caved-in sides.
- An anus smeared with feces.
- Red eyes.
- A runny nose.
- Shaky legs.
- Trembling.
- Sneezing and/or breathing with a rattle.
- Diarrhea (a clear signal of a contagious viral or bacterial disease).

It is smart to arrange a visit to the veterinarian on your way home from picking up your new hamster. They will make sure your pet is healthy and can answer any questions you might have.

AVOIDING HUMAN ILLNESS

Hamsters may carry diseases that can be transmitted to humans, including lymphocytic choriomeningitis virus (LCMV). These simple precautions can help prevent the risk of infection:

- 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.
- As cute and cuddly as they are, do not kiss small animals. Illnesses are sometimes spread this way.
- 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.
- 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 hamsters and their care. Contact your veterinarian for additional information.