



Milwood Animal Clinic

5942 Lovers Lane · Portage, MI · 49002

Phone (269) 342-9865

Fax (269) 342-6830

www.MilwoodAnimalClinic.com

Gerbils

There are quite a few sources of information on pet care available over the internet, some of which offer correct information. Others sources can be incorrect and harmful to your pet. Please consult with your veterinarian before making lifestyle, feeding, handling or caging changes.

Small caged pets can be wonderful companions and learning experiences for children. However, young children should not be assigned full time caretaker duties. A missed meal or lack of water to drink can be life-threatening for small animals that must have a constant supply of food and hydration available to survive. Plan on supervising your children's care of their pet every day.



Natural History

Gerbils are small rodents native to arid climates places in Africa, India and Asia. There are more than 110 species, varying somewhat in size and appearance. The Mongolian gerbil is a gentle and hardy animal that has become a popular pet. In its natural habitat, the Mongolian gerbil inhabits sandy, grass covered steppes and semi-deserts.

In the wild, these gerbils live in groups generally consisting of one parental pair, the most recent litter, and a few older pups. Only the dominant female will produce pups. A group lives in a central burrow with 10–20 exits. Some deeper burrows used for further escape from predators may be found in the burrow system. A group's burrows often interconnect with other groups. They are omnivorous, eating a variety of plant and animal materials.

Gerbils became popular pets after 1954, when 20 breeding pairs were brought to the United States from eastern Mongolia for scientific testing. Almost all pet gerbils today are descended from these 40.

As pets, gerbils are active, curious animals whose natural burrowing, tunneling and food gathering behaviors are quite entertaining. They are small, fragile animals that do not make suitable pets for small children to be handling. Gerbils are active during the day, are naturally inquisitive and enjoy human companionship. These small rodents are adapted for desert living and produce a minimum of urine and small stools. They have a lifespan of 3-5 years.

Handling

Gerbils are very active, scurrying and jumping quite quickly. They are social, and enjoy interacting with their owners, but must be handled with care. Remember: Tails are not handles! Gerbils must not be held, grabbed, or picked up by their tails as their tails are



prone to injury and sloughing. Gerbils do not tend to bite unless frightened or hurt. You may pick up your gerbil by gently scooping up in cupped hands. Because gerbils move very quickly and are so small and delicate, they should not be handled by young children.

Housing

Gerbils do well when kept in a large, screen covered aquarium with very deep bedding provided. Pairs of same sex gerbils do well together, but the possibility of aggression increases if more than 2 are housed together.

Gerbils are busy burrowers and need to be able to create a system of tunnels and caves in their enclosure. The commonly plastic structure of hamster and mouse cages is inappropriate for gerbils due to their ability to gnaw through it very quickly. Plastic can cause serious health issues for the animal if ingested, The recommended tank size is at least 10-gallons for 1 or 2 gerbils, 15-gallon tank 3 gerbils, 20-gallon tank 4 gerbils, and 30-gallon tank 6 gerbils. Wire caging is not recommended because of the danger of limb entanglement and the needed deep layer of bedding cannot be provided.



Gerbils will breed readily and often if mixed sexes are kept in the same enclosure. They typically do not fight among themselves if they are obtained and raised together when young, but care must be taken to introduce a new animal to established animals. Gerbils introduced as adults may fight to the death! There is a technique for splitting caging over a period of time that may allow for introducing adults while they adjust to each other. In general though, it is best to plan on raising gerbils together from a young age. More information is available online at agsgerbils.org

Bedding

Gerbils produce very little urine and tiny stools that generally do not have much odor. Paper based bedding is best for them *Avoid aromatic bedding such as pine or cedar.* Not only is it unnecessary because gerbils have very little odor, but it can cause health issues. Provide a very deep amount of bedding so that your little pet(s) can burrow and tunnel in it. Gerbils enjoy wooden toys made especially for small rodents to chew. Do not use plastic toys as they will gnaw and possibly ingest the plastic.

Gerbils also like to create nests for themselves among their tunnels and burrows. Plain white unscented tissue provides a safe and inexpensive nesting material. An untreated wood nesting box may also be provided as a sleeping and hiding place. Empty toilet paper rolls make fun, free, toys for gerbils which they can crawl through, and chew on a bit without harm.

Nutrition

Gerbils are omnivorous animals and need a variety of nutrients in their diets. A good quality lab block should be the main food item provided. We recommend Oxbow Essentials Hamster and Gerbil Food. Rodent seed mixtures contain some very fatty items, especially sunflower and safflower seeds and should only be given as treats, not as the main diet. Expect that whatever dish you provide food in will be promptly emptied or buried as your gerbil will hide the food or carry it to its burrow and caves



for storage. Very small amounts of fresh, washed greens may be offered. Remove any uneaten portions so it does not spoil in the cage.

Fresh water must be provided at all times. A water bottle with a roller ball for sipping should be used. It can be hung on the inside of the tank with a hook made especially for this. Care needs to be taken that the tip does not touch the deep bedding in the tank as this will drain the bottle quickly and soak the bedding. Be sure to check food and water levels twice daily as a gerbil will quickly die if it does not have access to a constant supply.

Exercise

The most important and easiest way to provide your little pet with exercise and an enriching environment is give it a large living area and deep bedding. Exercise wheels may be provided, but they must be the solid type, without open wire. A gerbil's tail is particularly prone to becoming injured on a wire wheel.

Safety

Always keep your little pet in secured caging and under close supervision when handling in going on. Gerbils are prey animals and their quick movements will attract a pet dog or cat. Do not leave a gerbil in an unsecured enclosure or loose around your other pets.

An escaped gerbil can hide in very small places and can be quite difficult to recapture once loose in a house. Since they gnaw, they can also be harmed by chewing things such as electrical wires, plastic, and other household items

Health

The most important ways to keep your gerbil healthy is to follow the guidelines provided by your veterinarian regarding proper caging, handling and feeding of your pet. These things, combined with close daily observation, attention to detail and regular check ups with your veterinarian will help ensure that your pet enjoys a long healthy life.

Observe you pet daily for changes in behavior, activity level, eating habits, and bowel habits. Having a pet that is comfortable with handling is a great benefit so that it can be examined up close on a daily basis. Inspect fur, feet and toes, eyes, nose and mouth, ears and hind end cleanliness as you handle your pet.

A gerbils's health situation can change quickly and changes need to be addressed quickly. It can be difficult to determine if your gerbil has a change in appetite or stools such as diarrhea because of the large caging, food hiding and the relatively small stools gerbils produce. Therefore, changes in activity or appearance, such as lethargy or a dull hair coat are causes for concern.



Gerbil Care – Review

- Small omnivorous rodents originating in Africa, India and Asia
- Live in systems of tunnels in family groups in the wild
- Love to dig and nest
- Should be raised together from an early age to avoid dangerous fighting among adults
- Friendly, curious and gentle pets
- Delicate and should not be handled by small children
- Tails are not handles!
- Do best in a large aquarium with a wire top – escape proof
- Need lots of deep paper based bedding. Do not use pine or cedar.
- No plastic caging or in cage
- Feed lab good quality lab blocks
- Treats: small amount of seeds, fresh greens
- Provide water in a hanging sipper bottle
- Must have food and water available at all times
- Observe daily for changes in activity, appearance, appetite, stools
- Seek veterinary care right away if abnormalities are noticed
- Plan regular examinations with your veterinarian
- Enjoy your furry little family member!

