



Milwood Animal Clinic

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Hamsters

There are quite a few sources of information 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 a 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

It is very helpful in the understanding of exotic pet behavior, feeding and care to know of the environments that the animals inhabit in the wild.

Pet hamsters are small rodents that are descended from animals that live wild in the Middle East and southeastern Europe. There are several species kept commonly as pets with the most familiar being the Golden or Syrian Hamster. More recently, other species such as the smaller Russian Hamster have gained popularity as pets.

Hamsters in the wild live underground during the day, occupying burrows and tunnels. Coming out to feed at night, they forage for seeds, fruits, vegetation and occasional insects. Hamsters have poor eyesight, utilizing scent glands on their flanks to leave a trail of smells to follow to return to their home dens. They utilize their sense of smell to find each other and to locate food sources in the environment.

The large cheek pouches are a relatively unique anatomic feature of hamsters. The pouches enable the animal to stock up on available food and transport it back to its den to be eaten later. This hoarding behavior is a distinct advantage in the wild as food sources may be variable and food seeking is a dangerous activity for small rodents that are prey to many other species.

The lifespan of a hamster is relatively short, about 2 years. They are prolific breeders, with some species able to reproduce as young as 4-5 weeks of age. Several litters a year are possible with litter sizes of anywhere from 5 to 20 or more offspring. Adult hamsters are solitary animals and display severe aggression towards other adult hamsters, interacting only during breeding. Some

species display more aggressive behaviors than do others. Young are weaned quite early and will be attacked by adults if they do not establish their own solitary territories and independence.

Hamsters as Pets

Hamsters were first captive bred and domesticated around 1939. Due to their small size, cuddly cute appearance, and relatively easy care needs they quickly became a common pet as well as a research animal. Many varieties with different coat types and colors have been selectively bred as pets.

Hamsters are naturally bright and curious, and are very active at night, sleeping during the day. During their normal awake times they are very busy, feeding and actively exploring their environment. They are known to keep their owners awake running on their exercise wheels and gnawing on caging, so many owners do not keep them in their sleeping areas.

If handled gently and at an early age hamsters can be quite friendly with their owners. Due to their small size they are fragile little pets and should not be handled by small children without direct supervision. Rough or careless handling often leads to life-threatening injury to these tiny creatures. Hamsters will be regarded as prey by other household pets such as cats and dogs and should never be out of their caging around them.

Pet hamsters display natural behaviors such as food hoarding and interspecies aggression that their wild counterparts do. Hamsters that are unaccustomed to handling, startled, frightened, or quickly awakened will not hesitate to bite as this is their only defense. They are also accomplished escape artists and difficult to recover once they are loose in a pet owner's house.

Handling

Hamsters handled frequently from a very young age usually remain docile and rarely bite. Certain species seem to be less easily handled than others. Those with docile temperaments and a history of not biting can simply be picked up by using one or both hands, and then held in both hands or in one hand held against the body.

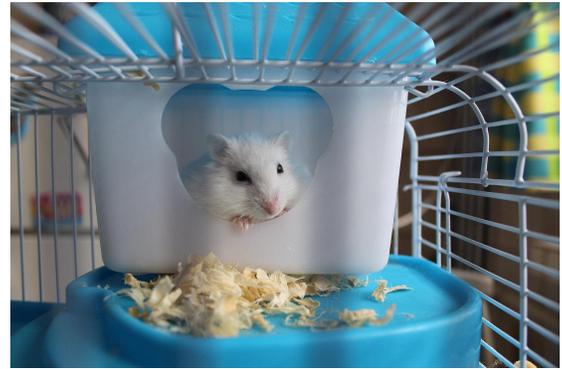


Some hamsters have less trustworthy personalities and begin to bite because they have been handled infrequently, are handled roughly, or have been suddenly disturbed or awakened. Hamsters whose personalities are not well known must always be approached cautiously. A glove or small towel can be used to pick up these hamsters, or the animals can be encouraged to crawl into a small container, which is then used to remove them from their enclosure. Unknown hamsters and those known to bite can also be picked up and restrained by grasping a large amount of skin behind the head. As much skin as possible should be grasped between the thumb, index and middle fingers because their skin is so loose. In fact, hamsters can literally turn nearly all the way around within their skins and bite a handler if this caution is not heeded!

Housing

Proper housing is critical in maintaining your pet hamster's health. The psychosocial well being of the pet must also be a primary consideration.

Hamsters can be housed in enclosures made of wire, stainless steel, durable plastic or glass. The last 3 materials are preferred because they resist corrosion. Wood and similar materials should not be used to construct enclosures because they are difficult to clean and cannot withstand the destructive gnawing of rodents. Wire must have sufficiently small spacing to prevent escape or entanglement. Many pet stores sell durable colored plastic enclosures that include attached horizontal and vertical tubes through which the hamster can crawl for exercise. These can be suitable enclosures for hamsters as long as they are disassembled and cleaned often and have good ventilation. Ammonia from urine can build up and be damaging to your pet's health if ventilation isn't adequate. Enclosed glass and plastic enclosures can become very hot inside in warm weather and should not be left in direct sunlight.



Enclosures must be free of sharp edges and other potential hazards. They need to be roomy enough to allow your pet to pursue normal movement and exercise. One reference recommends at least 20 square inches of floor area per hamster, and a cage height of at least 6 inches.

Being a small prey animal, it is essential that your hamster be provided with a private hiding place within its enclosure. This can be as simple as a cardboard box that is replaced as needed, a specially made hamster den from a pet store or any area in the pet's house where it can hide and sleep out of view and undisturbed. Recall that in the wild hamsters live underground in dens during the day, away from possible predators. Enormous stress is placed on these tiny creatures if they have no place to hide.

The enclosure must be built so your hamster cannot escape. This is an especially important consideration because hamsters are proficient "escape artists." They can squeeze through very small openings and will work at loose spots in their caging until they can get out. Once free of their enclosure, they rarely return to it and they are very difficult to find. A hamster free to roam the house will chew and gnaw on electrical and telephone cords, and household furnishings. Unfortunately, the ultimate outcome for the hamster is usually not good, as they often are never found and have no food sources.

Hamsters seem to do best when housed in enclosures with solid floors, relatively deep bedding, and abundant nesting material. They are burrowing animals so it is very important to provide enough bedding to reach a depth of several inches. This has been shown to significantly reduce stress-related activities such as wire-gnawing, wheel-running, etc. Enclosures should be easy to clean, well lighted and adequately ventilated. Bedding must be clean, nontoxic, absorbent, relatively dust-free and easy to replace. It is important to note that pine and cedar shavings should be avoided, as they can lead to respiratory problems. Care Fresh Litter (Absorption Corp, Bellingham, WA) is a recommended paper based substrate that contains no cedar or pine products and is available in pet stores. Your hamster may also enjoy paper towels and tissue paper to tear up into bedding materials.

Hamsters are primarily nocturnal (night-active), though they may exhibit relatively short periods of activity throughout the day. During their active period, hamsters eat and exercise. Hamsters

seem to especially enjoy exercise wheels and other activities. The plastic enclosures equipped with horizontal and vertical tubes/tunnels mentioned above are highly recommended for this reason. These tubes closely resemble the tunnels and dens utilized by their wild counterparts. Disposable boxes with multiple openings through which they can crawl can also be provided.

The frequency with which the enclosure should be cleaned depends on its design, and the materials out of which it is made. Originally coming from an arid environment, normal healthy hamsters produce small pellet sized stools and relatively small amounts of concentrated urine. They are clean, fastidious animals. When living in burrows, hamsters have special chambers for food storage and nesting, with another separate one for urination. As a general rule of thumb, the enclosure and all cage "furniture" should be cleaned and disinfected once weekly. The food and water containers should be cleaned and disinfected once daily. More than one set of containers should be maintained, and the soiled set should be washed in a dishwasher, if possible. Vigorous scrubbing of the enclosure and "furniture" with hot water and soap, and a thorough rinse, should be followed by the use of a disinfectant and rinsed again.

Pet hamsters should be housed singly. Sexually mature animals must *not* be housed together because of their inevitable aggressiveness toward each other. Hamsters reach sexual maturity in as few as 4-5 weeks. The breeding of hamsters is not recommended for most pet owners because issues of female/ male aggression, female cannibalism towards their own offspring, and the trouble of providing caging and homes for all the offspring of large litters. **The ONLY exception to this is robo hamsters, which can be kept in same-sex pairs and do well in a social setting.**

Diet

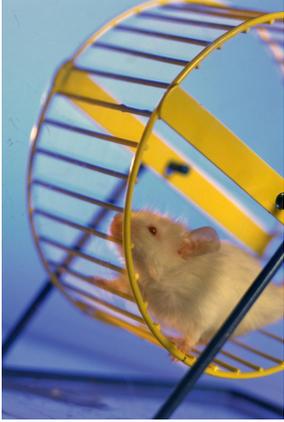
Hamsters, rats, mice and gerbils have similar dietary requirements. They all eat primarily plant material, but rats, mice, and particularly hamsters are known to eat some meat products, and are considered omnivorous. In the wild, hamsters will occasionally eat insects as a protein source. The basic diet for this group of pet rodents should consist of a good quality rodent chow or lab block that will provide all the essential nutrients. Rodent chows should have a minimum of 16% protein and between 4-5% fat. You can offer these dry foods in a bowl or hanging feeder to be consumed as needed. Purchase pelleted food in amounts that you will use within three months to prevent spoilage. Good quality rodent chows are considered to be fairly complete diets for your pet.



Your pet may enjoy other foods in addition to the commercial pellets, but these should not constitute more than 10% of the total diet. Vegetables and a small amount of fruit can be offered. Do not feed gas producing vegetables such as broccoli and cauliflower. All fresh items must be thoroughly washed to avoid exposing your pet to pesticide residues or bacterial contamination. Remove any uneaten fresh foods within three to four hours to prevent spoilage. Hamsters love grains, nuts, and seeds, but you should offer these foods in small quantities because of their high fat content. If these treats are given free choice, your pet will eat them exclusively and may develop nutritional disease, such as obesity. A few nuts or seeds given daily as a special treat is acceptable. "People" food high in fats, dairy and sodium are unhealthy for your pet.

Safety

Hamsters are easily injured. They are frequently dropped while being handled (especially by children), or after they bite. Pet hamsters allowed "free run of the house" (even for short periods) are often stepped on or kicked and seriously injured or killed.



Hamsters are frequently injured while inside an "exercise ball." This is a clear plastic sphere that is propelled along the floor by the action of the hamster running inside it. Injuries occur when a person accidentally kicks the ball or when it falls down a flight of stairs. Hamsters often perish when they are forgotten and left in balls without food and water. In spite of the clever design and obvious benefits of this device, hamster owners must continually supervise its use. All household members need to be aware that it is in use. These balls with a hamster inside are not playthings for other family pets or children! Above all, hamsters should not be forgotten while inside these devices.

Health

The most important ways to keep your hamster 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 hamster's health situation can change quickly and changes need to be addressed quickly. If your hamster has a change in eating habits, especially lack of appetite, or diarrhea, it could be signaling serious problems developing. Any changes in stools, such as loosely formed bowel movements or a decrease in stool formation are of concern.

Report abnormalities or changes to your veterinarian right away. Hamsters can become very ill very rapidly. Decreased energy, a loss of appetite and changes in bowel movements in such a small animal is a serious concern. Any injury has the potential to be life-threatening.

Hamster Care – review

- Rodents that are descended from animals native to the Middle East and Europe
- In the wild live in underground tunnels and burrows
- Primarily nocturnal (active at night)
- Are omnivorous (feed on food of both plant and animal origin)

- Poor eyesight; use sense of smell to negotiate travel and find food sources
- Have large cheek pouches used to store food for transport
- Hoard food in their burrows
- As adults are solitary and aggressive towards each other and younger hamsters
- Breed early and frequently with large litters

- Are naturally curious and active
- If acclimated when young, can be easily handled by older children and adults
- Will bite if frightened or startled
- Are very small and can be easily injured

- Must be housed separately
- Are escape artists, so enclosure must be very secure
- Enjoy large caging with tunnels and an exercise wheel
- Should have deep, paper based bedding materials, cleaned frequently
- Need to have a hiding place away from sight in their cage

- Are best fed laboratory blocks or rodent pellets for balanced nutrition
- Fruit, leafy greens, grains, nuts and seeds may be fed as treats

- Should never be given free run of the house
- Caution and close observation must be taken if placed in exercise balls
- Should not be loose around other household pets

- Observe daily for changes in eating habits, stools and activity
- Seek veterinary care right away if abnormalities are noticed
- Plan regular examinations with your veterinarian
- Enjoy your little furry family member!

