

Hamster Care

NATURAL HISTORY

The most common pet hamster is the golden or Syrian hamster, while another popular species is the dwarf hamster. In the wild, Syrian hamsters live in arid or semiarid areas in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Hamsters are nocturnal, like all rodents. The front paws of hamsters are modified hands, allowing them great dexterity when handling food. Hamsters are mainly herbivorous, eating primarily vegetable matter. The large cheek pouch of hamsters enables them to carry large quantities of food in their mouths. This adaptation is useful for the environment which they live where food occurs irregularly but in great abundance.

SPECIAL CHARACTERISTICS

Longevity

Syrian Hamster: 1.5-3 years

Dwarf Hamster: 1.5-2 years

Adult Weight

Syrian Hamster: Male: 87-130g, Female: 95-130g

Dwarf Hamster: 28-57g

Birth Weight

Syrian Hamster: 1.5-3g

Dwarf Hamster: 1-2g

Gestation

Syrian Hamster: 15-18 days

Dwarf Hamster: 18-25 days

Litter Size

Syrian Hamster: 5-10 pups

Dwarf Hamster: 4-6 pups

Body Temperature

Syrian Hamster: 100.6°

Dwarf Hamster: 100.6°

Age at Maturity

Syrian Hamster: Male: 8 weeks, Female: 6 weeks

Dwarf Hamster: 2 months

Temperament

Hamsters make fun pets, especially for children. They are large and slow enough for a child to hold. However, hamsters are high stress pets and must be handled slowly, especially when awakening them. Hamsters often bite when they are startled. Hamsters are nocturnal and the noise of an exercise wheel may keep you up at night.

CAPTIVE CARE REQUIREMENTS

Cage

Select a cage that is easy to clean, especially if a child is changing the cage (it is not recommended that young children change the cage without supervision by an adult). A cage with a light weight plastic bottom tall enough to hold bedding is sufficient, and will allow good ventilation.

Bedding

Recycled paper products are the most comfortable and commonly used bedding. It is recommended that you do not use any cedar/pine shavings, or corncob byproduct, as it may attribute to health problems in your hamster.

Water

A sipper water bottle affixed to the outside of the cage or a water bowl should be used. The bottle should be filled with fresh water every day, and the stopper should be checked for leaks, hair, bubbles, and mineral deposit plugs. Bottles and dishes should be thoroughly cleaned with soapy water followed by bleach once a week. Both should also be dishwasher safe. The sipper portion of the water bottle should be thoroughly scrubbed with a bottle brush to remove any non-visible debris. Be sure the bottle and/or dish is rinsed free of all bleach before filling it and returning it to your hamsters cage.

Diet

A mixture of seeds and pellets is not recommended, as the hamster will preferentially eat the nutritionally deficient seed over the pellets. You must maintain food control. Give your hamster a pelleted-diet, such as rodent laboratory block. Your hamster may also enjoy fresh vegetables such as carrots, squash, broccoli, cauliflower, cucumber, spinach, and other greens. Hamsters have a sensitive digestive tract and cannot tolerate high-sugar items such as fruits. Remember to wash all vegetables well before feeding them to you hamster.

Temperature

Hamsters do not have sweat glands and are unable to pant, so they do not have an efficient method of heat removal. This makes hamsters prone to heat stress and therefore should be kept in a cool area of the house during summer months. Your hamster's environment should be between 75°-85°F and 40%-60% humidity.

Exercise Toys

Your hamster will use the exercise wheel frequently, so be sure to get one that is quiet. Some female hamsters have been known to run up to 10km a night. If your hamster has long hair, be sure to trim it so it doesn't become entangled in the wheel. Check metal wheels for sharp projections. Spherical balls, although popular, can be harmful to the hamster if used around stair wells, direct sun light, small children, and other pets.

Cage Furniture

A hiding place or nesting place should be available for your hamster. Most pet stores provide plastic houses and huts for hamsters. Do not provide any additional material in the house besides the bedding.

Exercise

It is not recommended that you let your hamster out of its cage to run around the house or outside. Not only are they too small but they are notorious chewers and may chew on wires, carpet and base boards.

HEALTH CARE

It is highly recommended that you visit your veterinarian shortly after getting your new hamster, as hamsters tend to be the least hardy of the small rodents when newly purchased.

“Wet Tail” is the term used to describe diarrhea in hamsters and can be fatal if not treated immediately. Death may occur as early as 24 hours after the appearance of symptoms.