



Caring for Pet Hamsters

Hamsters are adorable little rodents with large cheek pouches and short stubby tails. They have become popular pets since their domestication in the 1930s. Syrian hamsters, the largest of the pet hamster breeds, have several color and coat varieties which include the common 'golden' hamsters, colored short-haired 'fancy' hamsters, and long-haired 'teddy bear' hamsters. Dwarf hamsters that are kept as pets include Campbell's, Winter White, and Roborovski hamsters.

Hamsters are intelligent and playful. They have excellent hearing and sense of smell but poor eyesight, which makes them prone to falling if left unattended on elevated surfaces. Many hamsters are nippy, and caution must be exercised when handling them, especially if they are disturbed while sleeping. They are largely nocturnal.

Diet

Pellets specifically formulated for hamsters offer complete nutrition and are the recommended diet for all pet hamsters. Seed-based "foraging" diets are not recommended, as hamsters tend to pick out only the tastiest items (usually seeds), which can lead to obesity and malnutrition. Supplement your pet's diet with small amounts of healthy foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables or unsweetened breakfast, and discard uneaten fresh food daily so that it does not spoil. High-fat items such as nuts, seeds, and meal worms should be avoided or offered only sparingly. Make diet changes gradually to prevent your pet from developing diarrhea.

Hamsters should have clean water available at all times. Water is easily provided in water bottles equipped with sipper tubes. Juvenile hamsters need special consideration to make sure they are strong enough to use the sipper tube as well as reach it. Fresh water should be provided daily, not only when the bottle empties.

Housing

Hamsters do very well in solid bottom cages with deep bedding and ample nesting material. Recycled paper products such as CareFresh make the best bedding. Shredded tissue paper or paper towels makes excellent nesting material. More space is always better for your pet, and a single hamster should not be housed in anything smaller than a 20 gallon aquarium. Optimal temperature range for hamsters is between 65 to 80°F, with babies doing best at 70 to 75°F. Twelve hour light cycles are preferred. Provide your hamster with places to hide, such as a plastic hut or flower pot on its side. Running wheels should have solid flooring so that your hamster does not get injured. Cardboard rolls and branches from apple trees are popular chew toys.

Most hamsters are best kept as solitary pets, especially if they are Syrian hamsters. Dwarf hamsters are less aggressive with each other and may be able to live in small groups.

The cage and accessories should be cleaned thoroughly once to twice weekly. An exception to this schedule is when newborn babies are present; wait until they are at least two weeks old to disturb the cage. Other factors that may require increased frequency of cleaning are the number of hamsters in the cage, the type of bedding material provided, and the cage design and size. Clean the floor and walls with soap and water weekly. Change the bedding weekly. Water bottles and food dishes should be cleaned daily.

Handling

Hamsters handled frequently from a young age usually remain docile and seldom bite. These animals can be picked up gently by cupping in one or both hands and held against one's body. Beware that even docile hamsters may bite if surprised or abruptly awakened from sleep. Other hamsters, however, may be more apprehensive and aggressive, and are not necessarily good pets for children.

Veterinary Care:

Like other prey species, hamsters tend to hide signs of illness. Hamsters are prone to a number of diseases, including bladder stones, heart disease, skin disease, diarrhea, and tumors. By the time an owner recognizes that a hamster is sick it may have been sick for a while, and prompt medical attention should be sought. We recommend wellness visits for hamsters every 6 months to help catch medical issues early when they are still treatable.