

How to Keep Your Hamster Happy, Healthy and Safe

- Set up a schedule of consistent time and attention each day to maintain tameness.
- Clean the enclosure environment at least weekly to reduce odors and check for food that was hoarded and left to spoil in hiding spots.
- Use a wheel with solid flooring or modify a wire wheel by weaving a paper material through the rungs to prevent leg damage.
- Ensure that droppings are normal, firm pellets. Sticky or soft droppings may indicate diarrhea, while scant smaller droppings may indicate decreased appetite or anorexia.
- Because free-ranging hamsters spend almost all daylight hours underground, exposure to direct sunlight in captivity is not desirable.
- Proper housing should include:
 - » Be made of strong metal or glass that is escape-proof, as hamsters can gnaw through wood, plastic and soft metals
 - » Include a secure lid and solid-bottom flooring
 - » Offer at least 150 square inches (967 cm²) of floor space with a cage height of at least 6–10 inches (15–25 cm)
 - » Include a nesting or hide box with deep litter for burrowing
 - » Be placed in optimum temperatures of 65–79°F (18–26°C), with young maintained between 71–75°F (21–24°C)
 - » Provide a relative humidity environment of 40–70%
 - » Contain a nesting material, such as paper bedding or soft wood shavings; the hamster will instinctively rearrange all nesting materials to simulate a cozy burrow. Avoid pine, cedar and corn cob for bedding.
- It is important to prevent hamsters from accessing:
 - » Other pets and unsupervised children
 - » Electrical cords
 - » Pesticides or other toxins, including house plants
 - » Tobacco and cigarette smoke
 - » Wire exercise wheels and wire cage flooring
 - » Too many seeds and treats
 - » Cloth nesting material with strings that may entangle around the limbs
 - » Toys with sharp edges

Common Disorders of Hamsters

It is recommended that your hamster have an annual exam. However, if you notice your hamster exhibiting any of these signs or symptoms, please contact your veterinarian as soon as possible.

- **Behavioral Disorders**
 - » Litter abandonment or cannibalism of young
 - » Aggression between adults
- **Cardiac Disease**
 - » Especially in older adults
- **Dental**
 - » Cheek pouch disease (Impaction/Infection)
 - » Fractures
 - » Malocclusion of the incisors
 - » Overgrowth
- **Dermatologic Disease (Mites, Bacterial infection, Contact dermatitis)**
 - » Causing hair loss and itching
- **Endocrine Diseases**
 - » Diabetes
 - » Hyperadrenocorticism
- **Gastrointestinal Disease**
 - » Diarrhea ("wet tail")
- **Lymphoma**
- **Obesity**
- **Trauma**

Resources

- **Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians** (AEMV.com)
- **Lafeber Emeraid** (lafeber.com/vet/mammal-medicine)
- **Oxbow Animal Health** (oxbowanimalhealth.com)

EXOTICS COMPANION CARE SERIES

How to Care for Your

Hamster



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To learn more, visit the Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians at AEMV.com

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ABOUT YOUR HAMSTER

*The most common hamster species maintained as a pet is the golden or Syrian hamster (*Mesocricetus auratus*). Others include the Chinese hamster (*Cricetulus griseus*) and Siberian (dwarf winter white or Djungarian) hamster (*Phodopus sp.*). The European or black-bellied hamster (*Cricetus cricetus*) is not usually kept domestically.*

The golden hamster originates from a very limited range in the Middle East, where owl predators and destruction of territory are threatening the species' existence. Many hamsters still exist in the wild. Today, captive breeding facilities supply the pet market.

Hamsters are **small, appealing pets** that adapt well to captivity. They do not require a lot of living space and are **relatively inexpensive to maintain**.

What to Expect from Your Hamster

Hamsters are small, appealing pets that adapt well to captivity. They do not require a lot of living space and are relatively inexpensive to maintain. With frequent gentle handling a hamster can easily become tame. However, they are nocturnal animals and will not tolerate being held still for very long. Hamsters may bite or show aggression in response to rough handling, sudden disturbances, being around other hamsters (especially female hamsters that are pregnant or lactating), or when they are ill or in pain.

To hold your hamster, care must be taken to maintain gentle control and prevent being bitten. Hamsters may be held in the hands if they are used to human contact or placed in a small container. A small cloth may help scoop up the pet without risk of being bitten.

A unique characteristic of hamsters is the presence of cheek pouches, which are used to store and transport food to the hamster's burrow. Similar to other species of rodents, hamsters have four incisor teeth, which grow throughout life. These are worn down by gnawing on hard objects.

Is your hamster a male or female?

Male hamsters have rather large scrotal sacs that give them a rounded posterior when viewed from above. Gentle pressure on the abdomen of the male hamster will cause the testicles to descend into the sacs. The female hamster's posterior is not rounded, but more pointed when viewed from above. In addition, the female has three orifices (anus, vaginal orifice and urinary orifice) in contrast to the male's two orifices (anus and penis). It may be difficult to tell the sex of very young hamsters.



What do hamsters do all day?

Most hamsters should be housed individually in an enclosure. Some Siberian hamsters may be social; however, care must be taken when housing multiple hamsters together. In some cases, a larger enclosure will be required. If an aquarium-style enclosure is chosen, a 20 gallon tank is appropriate. Hamsters are excellent climbers and burrowers and should be provided with plastic tubes, PVC pipe, cardboard boxes and edible "hay huts" as safe outlets for their activities. Hamsters enjoy running in exercise wheels; however, only wheels with a solid running surface should be used to prevent limbs from being trapped and injured. Clear exercise balls may be used to allow hamsters time to explore out of the cage. Balls must be secured carefully to prevent escape and injuries, such as falling down the stairs.

What should you feed your hamster?

Hamsters should be fed a commercial uniform pellet, such as a rodent block. Seed mix diets are popular, but many hamsters select only certain parts of the mix, resulting in possible dietary deficiencies, obesity, and even diabetes. Young hamsters begin eating solid food at 7–10 days of age, so food and water must be accessible for their smaller size. Drinking water is provided via sipper tubes. The water should be changed daily to ensure that the tube is functional and not clogged with food.