

How to Keep Your Gerbil Happy, Healthy and Safe

- Prompt veterinary care should be sought for any sign of illness.
- Gerbils require daily attention and remain tame with frequent handling.
- Fresh food and water should be available at all times.
- The cage must be thoroughly cleaned at least weekly.
- Provide safe items for chewing, such as cardboard tubes and boxes or pesticide-free and nontoxic tree branches and bark.
- Provide suitable materials for nesting, such as tissue paper, cotton balls, paper torn in strips.
- Proper housing should include:
 - » Allow for 72 square inches (464 cm²) per gerbil as a minimum cage size; a minimum of 350 square inches (0.24 m²) is needed for a breeding pair.
 - » Have cage sides at least 6 inches (14 cm) high.
 - » Be escape-proof.
 - » Contain a hide box.
 - » Include suitable substrates, such as shredded paper (non-inked), recycled newspaper composite materials or pellets, reclaimed wood pulp bedding, hardwood shavings or compressed wheat straw. Avoid pine, cedar and corn cob for bedding.
 - » Include a water bottle even though they are desert animals and drink less than other rodents.
- It is important for your gerbil to avoid:
 - » Electrical cords
 - » Dogs, cats, ferrets and young children
 - » Pesticides and other toxins
 - » Toxic houseplants
 - » Tobacco and cigarette smoke
 - » Cedar or pine shavings
 - » Wire exercise wheels
 - » Plastic toys that can be broken apart and consumed
 - » Wire flooring in the enclosure
 - » Exposure to direct sunlight or temperatures over 90°F (32°C)

Common Disorders of Gerbils

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

- Trauma (including tail slip)
- Malnutrition
- Sore nose/facial eczema/nasal dermatitis
- Epileptiform seizures
- Diarrhea/enteritis
- Malocclusion
- Cancer/neoplasia
- Obesity

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

Gerbil



ASSOCIATION
OF EXOTIC
MAMMAL
VETERINARIANS

Cover image: Svetlanistaya/Shutterstock.com
Inside image: DMegias/Shutterstock.com

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

ABOUT YOUR GERBIL

*There are 15 gerbil species worldwide, of which the Mongolian gerbil (*Meriones unguiculatus*) is the prevalent pet species in the United States. Mongolian gerbils are native to desert regions of Mongolia and northeastern China. They are active both day and night, but peak activity is at night. They are social animals that live in elaborate underground tunnel systems and burrows.*

Unlike their wild Mongolian counterparts, gerbils in the pet trade today are all captive bred. They make appropriate pets for beginners, and their natural curiosity makes them interesting to watch as they explore their environments. Gerbils are available in a variety of color types: agouti, black, albino, white, cinnamon, lilac, blue, cream, silver and sable. Spotted gerbils with multiple coat-colors are also popular.

Gerbils tend to be friendly, clean, quiet and curious pets. They rarely bite and can be easily handled.



What to Expect from Your Gerbil

Gerbils tend to be friendly, clean, quiet and curious pets. They rarely bite and can be easily handled. They have low odor and little waste production. Their small size reduces concerns about space requirements. With proper husbandry, gerbils rarely exhibit problems in captivity. Because gerbils are very quick movers and tend to jump, they should be supported on the palm of the hand with the base of the tail held close to their body. The handler should avoid grasping the tip of the tail because the skin may pull off the tail. The gerbil may be restrained by scruffing the skin at the nape of the neck or by using a small washcloth wrapped around the body.

Is your gerbil male or female?

Male gerbils have a large, dark scrotum and a longer anogenital distance than females. Breeding pairs tend to be monogamous and maintain lifelong relationships. It is best to acquaint gerbils with one another before they are 8 weeks of age to try to prevent fighting. Adult gerbils of either sex may fight to the death if they are introduced to each other as adults. Ensuring adequate cage space is also important to eliminate fighting. It is best to house gerbils as a pair; neutering the male can prevent overpopulation. Two same sex gerbils (preferably from the same litter) can be successfully housed together.

What do gerbils do all day?

Like all rodents, gerbils need to have safe materials for gnawing that will help wear down the continually growing incisor teeth. Wooden blocks for this purpose are readily available at most pet stores. An exercise wheel with solid flooring provides an outlet for energy, and exercise balls allow the gerbil to safely explore outside of its cage environment. Gerbils like to build nests out of nesting material, especially in the cooler winter months. A common characteristic of pet gerbils is their propensity to dig incessantly with their forepaws in the corner of the cage. They also thump with their hind legs.

What should you feed your gerbil?

Commercial pelleted diets are preferred over seed mixes for gerbils. These uniform pelleted diets may be fed with fresh vegetables (e.g., cabbage, kale, broccoli, carrots, beets) and soaked sprouts. Alfalfa hay should be available for grazing and is a good calcium source for nursing females. Excessive consumption of sunflower seeds and other high-fat foods will lead to obesity and other health problems. Fresh clean drinking water should always be available. A sipper tube or small water bottle mounted on the outside of the cage with the drinking spout on the inside is ideal to prevent chewing on the bottle itself.

Where should you house your gerbil?

Plexiglass enclosures designed for small rodents make adequate houses for gerbils; however, a regular cleaning schedule must be maintained. Solid flooring is preferable to wire flooring. A clean, dry, absorbent and nonabrasive bedding (e.g., reclaimed wood pulp) of at least 2 cm deep is recommended. Providing 12 hours of light and 12 hours of dark is a good schedule for lighting. The ideal temperature should be between 65–71°F (18–21°C) with 45–55% humidity.

VITAL STATISTICS

BODY LENGTH (no tail): 3–6 inches (7–15 cm)

TOTAL BODY WEIGHT:

Females: 55–85 g

Males: 65–100 g

AGE OF SEXUAL MATURITY: 65–85 days

AVERAGE LIFE SPAN IN CAPTIVITY: 3–4 years