

Caring for Your Hamster

About Hamsters

Hamsters were first discovered in Syria in the early 1800s; their range extends from the Middle East to the Steppes in Russia. The most popular types of hamsters are Syrians, Russian Dwarfs, Chinese Dwarfs, Roborovski (referred to as Robos) and Djungarian (referred to as DJs).

This small rodent makes one of the most popular introductory pets in the U.S. Hamsters are by nature clean and easy to care for. They eat little, they are readily available and they're inexpensive. Most importantly, hamsters are also a playful source of entertainment.

Hamsters have poor eyesight, relying mostly on their sense of smell and a keen sense of hearing. They rub their scent glands on objects, creating trails they can follow.

Tamed hamsters don't mind being handled if you pick them up around their middle with one hand, and place them in the palm of your other hand. You should form a little cave with your hands when handling your hamster. This can prevent not-so-tame hamsters from running away.

Habitat

Hamsters are solitary foraging animals by nature, and need a spacious cage to move around as well as places to hide, particularly if

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you choose to have more than one hamster in the enclosure. To meet this need, various hamster cages have built-in tunnels and exercise wheels along with a food dish and water bottle. Some habitats provide climbing tubes.

It's important that you regularly clean your hamster's habitat. Your hamster will tend to urinate in one or two corners of its habitat. Scoop out the wet bedding every day and replace with fresh bedding. A small scoop makes this an easy task.

Change your hamster's bedding once a week. Be sure to also remove any food your hamster may have stored.

Clean your hamster's habitat thoroughly once a month. Wash the habitat with lukewarm soapy water, and be sure to avoid ammonia-based products. Thoroughly rinse with water to remove any residue. Make sure the habitat is completely dry before adding fresh bedding.

Grooming

Most hamsters don't actually need to be brushed, as they groom themselves. However, if you have a Long Haired Syrian hamster, also known as the Teddy Bear Hamster, your pet could use a weekly brushing to help remove wood shavings, food and dirt from her coat. You can do this using a special small animal comb, or even a soft, fine toothbrush.

Hamsters don't usually require having their claws trimmed. However, if your pet scratches itself while self-grooming or its nails are starting to curl beneath its feet, you may need to see a veterinarian.

Your hamster's teeth will likely be brownish-white or yellow. Because their teeth never stop growing, hamsters need a chew toy, chew stick or wooden toy available at all time to wear down those constantly growing incisors. If your hamster's teeth become overgrown, or you see a broken or chipped tooth, take your pet to the vet as soon as possible.

Hamsters rarely need baths, but if you feel it needs one, spot-clean your pet using a damp lukewarm washcloth or unscented baby wipes. Keep your hamster out of drafts while it dries. For dwarf hamsters you can provide a small dish of small animal dust weekly for your dwarf hamster to roll around in to help remove oils from its fur. Leave the dust bath in for just a few hours, no more than 12. Hairless hamsters can benefit from a small amount of unscented baby oil rubbed into their skin to help keep it soft.

Water and Food

For the most part, hamsters do not require a lot of different types of foods. A mixture of high-quality hamster food, grains and fresh fruits and vegetables will meet your pet's nutritional needs. Do not make a dramatic change to your hamster's diet, which could stress your pet and cause it to develop wet tail.

More ...

This information is designed as a basic guide. There are several books and online resources available which provide in-depth information on hamsters and their care.

Your hamster will not overeat, so be sure to keep its food bowl filled at all times with a well-balanced hamster diet that is specially formulated to provide balanced nutrition with the ideal daily dosage of vitamins and minerals, plus all the other essential nutrients.

You can supplement its diet with a limited (no more than 10% of her total daily food intake) amount of:

Grains are the primary food for hamsters providing protein and carbohydrates. You should provide approximately a tablespoonful daily from a prepared hamster mixture. Fatty nuts (peanuts and sunflower seeds) promote obesity and should be only a small part of the mixture.

Fresh, organically grown greens (such as Romaine lettuce, dandelion greens, carrot tops, broccoli spears, spinach, artichokes and any other dark green veggies) are great choices. Avoid iceberg lettuce and other veggies or fruits (like watermelon) high in water content as they can cause diarrhea. Remember to wash the vegetables thoroughly to remove traces of harmful pesticides.

Hamsters love fruits including apples, pears, strawberries and bananas. Fruits should be provided in moderation as a supplement to the regular diet. Remove any vegetables or fruits not eaten within 24 hours.

Timothy hay is a great gnawing food that can help keep your hamster's teeth in good condition.

Provide your pet with clean, fresh, filtered, chlorine-free water, changed daily.

Reward your hamster with its favorite hamster treats, just keep them in moderation.

Do not feed your hamster chocolate, caffeine or alcohol, as these can cause serious medical conditions. Avoid sugar and treats with a high fat content.

Keeping Your Hamster Healthy

Clean habitat and the proper diet will go along way toward keeping your pet healthy. A healthy hamster should have:

- A smooth, shiny coat.
- No hair loss.
- A symmetrical body with no lumps.
- A clean anus.
- Clear eyes without any discharge.
- A dry nose.
- A steady gate.
- Teeth that are not overgrown.
- A lively disposition.

An unhealthy hamster will display:

- Rumpled or dull fur.
- Caved-in sides.
- An anus smeared with feces.
- Red eyes.
- A runny nose.
- Shaky legs.
- Trembling.
- Sneezing and/or breathing with a rattle.
- Diarrhea (a clear signal of a contagious viral or bacterial disease).

It's not a bad idea to arrange a visit to the vet on your way home from picking up your new hamster. The vet will check and make sure your pet is healthy and can answer any other questions you might have.

Avoiding Human Illness

Hamsters may carry diseases that can be transmitted to humans, including lymphocytic choriomeningitis (LCM). The simple precautions below can help prevent the risk of infection.

✓ Closely supervise children and make sure they wash their hands with soap and water after handling small animals, their habitats or anything in their habitats.

✓ As cute and cuddly as they are, do not kiss small animals. Illnesses are sometimes spread this way.

✓ Never use food-preparation areas to clean small animal habitats or anything in their habitats. If you clean the habitat in the bathroom, disinfect the area completely afterwards.

✓ Clean the habitat, food and water bowls in a well-ventilated area.

Children under 5, pregnant women, senior citizens, and people with weakened immune systems run a greater risk of infection; contact your health care provider for more information.

