

Hamsters/gerbils

Due to their small size and adorable features, hamsters and gerbils are popular pets. However, though they are considered more “low maintenance” pets compared to other animals, it is important to know about their basic needs to ensure for a happy and healthy pet!

Housing

Aquariums are the preferred source of housing, rather than wire cages. Hamsters and gerbils may get their feet, limbs or heads caught between the wire bars and cause trauma or broken bones. Aquariums are smooth sided, reducing of the changes of this occurring. It also prevents the bedding from falling out, and allows your pets to burrow. A screen/wire mesh top should be used for the cover as this allows good air flow and ventilation to your pet. Clean the aquarium routinely to reduce the chance of disease and give your pocket pet with a good quality of life. This includes fully washing the enclosure with diluted soap and water weekly.

Their enclosure should be kept at room temperature. Do not leave it in areas of the house that are excessively hot or cold.

Bedding

Carefresh is an excellent source of bedding for your hamster or gerbil. Do not use shavings, such as cedar or pine, as these may cause upper respiratory diseases in your pet.

Handling/behavior

Hamsters and gerbils vary in their behaviors when being handled. Hamsters are nocturnal and care should be taken if awaking a hamster to handle them. Hamsters can be biters if they are not socialized with their owners, so owners should handle their pets often to avoid getting bitten. Hamsters that are handled by humans less tend to bite more. Gerbils, on the other hand, are very active and are not nocturnal, and they rarely bite. Never pick a gerbil up by the tail though, as this can cause serious injury or harm. You should scoop up your gerbil to handle them.

Both hamsters and gerbils love to stash their food in their environment, so it is not uncommon to find their food dish is empty, but there are traces of food all around their cage. Hamsters have cheek pouches, which allow them to store lots of food or other items inside their mouths. It may be an odd thing to see to a new hamster owner, but it is nothing to be concerned about. Both hamsters and gerbils participate in coprophagia, which means they will eat their own fecal matter. This is natural and is a good thing for them to do as it provides them with essential nutrients.

Diet/water

Hamsters and gerbils should be fed primarily a high quality pellet hamster/gerbil diet (such as Oxbow) to provide them with a complete diet. We do not recommend that you feed your hamster or gerbil a mixed seed/nut diet, because your pet will pick out what it prefers from these mixes and often leave the healthy items behind. Hay should also be provided to encourage natural foraging behaviors of these animals. It also provides a good nesting material for your pet. Fresh vegetables may also be provided to your pet daily, but be sure to throw out the vegetables from the day before if any are left behind. For hamsters, it is best to give them their vegetables in the evening as this is when they are most active.

Water should always be provided. It should be provided fresh daily. It is a good idea to give your hamster or gerbil water from a bottle, rather than a bowl. They can use a bowl just fine, but they tend to get

bedding in the bowl, and they soak the bedding around the bowl. Wet bedding is a nice place for bacteria and mold to grow. Providing their water in a bottle is more hygienic than in a bowl, just as long as you are cleaning out the bottle often.

Toys/exercise

An exercise wheel is a good source of exercise for your hamster and gerbil. Also, tunnels are nice for your pet to run through, as it provides entertainment and exercise. Toys or unpainted/untreated blocks or wood are recommended to help keep their teeth healthy. Gerbils and hamsters have teeth that constantly grow, so they must be able to constantly chew to keep these from overgrowing.

Physical Exam Schedule

Just as it is recommended by your doctor that you receive a physical exam annually, we recommend that you bring your hamster or gerbil in for yearly preventative care exams with a veterinarian. Based on the physical exam, your veterinarian will make recommendations to optimize your hamster's overall health. Your hamster should have a fecal examined yearly to ensure they are free of intestinal parasites.