

Hamster Care Information



Hamsters are the most common rodents kept as pets. When speaking of hamsters, people are almost exclusively referring to the Syrian or Golden Hamster, although there are several dwarf varieties kept as pets. The original variation of the Syrian Hamster is golden, but they are now available in many colors, as well as long haired "teddy bear" varieties. The Golden hamster is about 7 inches long when fully grown.

Dwarf hamsters are native to the wild of Mongolia. They have been available as pets for about twenty years and are growing in popularity. The Campbell's Russian Dwarf hamster is about 8 centimeters long when fully grown. Other hamster species sometimes offered as pets include Chinese dwarf hamsters and Robrovski's dwarf hamster. The Chinese Dwarf is considered to be a "rat-like" hamster. They have a slightly longer tail, a longer, more pointed nose and tend to have a thinner build. They are brown, with a dorsal stripe.

Housing

Hamster cages come in basically three types: wire, glass and plastic. Wire cages are usually the least expensive of the three types. When looking for a wire cage, be sure to buy one that does NOT have a grate and tray setup in the bottom. This usually makes cleaning the cage more difficult. Also, the wire grating is not very comfortable for the hamster. If you wish to buy a completely escape-proof cage, buy a wire cage with a metal bottom that latches on to the walls. Unless you leave the door hatch open, this kind of cage is unescapeable.

As for glass aquariums, these are also inexpensive. They provide quite a bit of space and are easily cleaned. A 10 gallon size is fine for a single golden hamster. Aquariums require a lid to keep the hamster in, and a special water bottle adapter. Both of these should ideally be made of metal (wire mesh for the lid). Be sure to secure the lid.

Plastic cages, marketed under names like Habitrail, SAM and Hartz, are with a few exceptions the most expensive and difficult to clean of any cage available. The hamsters, however, do tend to like them, although they are easily chewed through. If you decide on one of these cages

anyway, be sure to get a large enough model - many cramped cages are marketed as "starter homes" - and definitely purchase one that does not have wire grating on the floor. You will need to clean the tubes of the set, which quickly become dirty. The plastic cages also must be cleaned at least once a week.

No matter what cage you buy, the basic equipment remains the same. A hamster requires a water bottle (plastic and steel, NOT rubber and glass, which can cause internal bleeding or intestinal blockage if chewed), a food bowl, an exercise wheel, and a nest box. Most exercise wheels available are wire, but some hamsters may become caught and injured in them. If you have a fish tank setup, buy the Habitrail Big Wheel, which hangs on the aquarium sides and is very large. If the wheel squeaks, apply a dab of mineral oil or baby oil to the axle and spin it a few times. The nest box can be wood, ceramic, plastic or woven grass. Woven grass bird houses or glazed ceramic, well-ventilated houses are best. Several toys can be provided, but don't crowd the cage. Toilet tissue and paper towel tubes, small empty boxes, fish tank/furniture packing corners, and wooden thread spools all make good toys.

Line the tank with white paper and cover with aspen shavings, corn cob litter, recycled newspaper pellets (such as CareFresh), timothy hay or shredded white paper. Do not use cedar shavings because the oils in the shavings can cause various health problems. They like additional soft materials to make their nests, like tissue paper, kleenex, or paper. Change all the bedding twice a week, disinfect the cage with a mild cleaner, rinse thoroughly and let it dry before putting down fresh bedding. Hamsters tend to urinate in one corner of their cage and this should be changed daily, as they produce a fairly pungent urine. Check for stockpiles of food to make sure that no spoiling food is contained within. Their cage should be cleaned late in the evening, since hamsters are nocturnal. The temperature of the room they are in should be between 50 and 80 degrees, otherwise the hamster will hibernate.

Feeding

Provide food and water all the time. Water should be provided in a gravity-fed bottle, and food should be in a sturdy non-tip dish. Hamsters may chew through a water bottle, so it's best to hang it outside the cage or use a metal hanger to protect the bottom of the bottle. The base of their diet can be grain and seed mixtures for hamsters found at pet stores. Avoid those that look like birdseed and include only sunflower seeds, corn flakes, and small grains. A good mix should contain other seeds and nuts as well, such as pea, safflower, peanut and bits of dried vegetables. A hamster eats a tablespoon or less of this mix per day. Also, give them greens, fruits and vegetables in small amounts each day including dandelion greens, chickweed, alfalfa pellets, spinach, lettuce, carrots, apples, and other fruits. A handful of hay can be provided two to three times weekly. Some hamsters particularly like yogurt which can be given in very small

quantities as an infrequent treat. A large commercial treat or wood chew can be provided once per week. Do NOT feed them raw beans, apple seeds, potatoes, parsley and green tomatoes - all are poisonous. Iceberg lettuce and citrus fruits should be avoided, and never gather grass or herbs from any place that may have been sprayed with chemicals. Salt/mineral blocks are not necessary if the hamster has a balanced diet.

Illness/Health

Wet tail is the most common disease in hamsters. Symptoms are wetness around the tail, caused by runny diarrhea, reduced appetite, and weakness. If showing symptoms, they should be taken to a vet immediately, and their cage and bedding should be disinfected.

Older hamsters have some normal hair loss. Older hamsters can also get skin lesions and/or tumors. They are also susceptible to pneumonia if not kept in a warm environment. The cage can be kept under a warm lamp during the day to keep an older hamster warm (but do not let the cage overheat!).

Exercise

They will burrow and tunnel, and they like a wheel for exercise. You can also provide a plastic ball to let them run SUPERVISED in the room. Make sure there are no other pets around and that the ball is securely fastened on each end. Hamsters are very active and like to have lots of activities, including tunnels, ladders and boxes to burrow in and investigate.

Socialization/Behavior

Golden hamsters must be housed alone once they reach adult age, since they are territorial and solitary. They will often fight and usually kill other members of their species if they must share space. Dwarf hamsters of any variety, however, should be kept in pairs or groups. Dwarves, unlike the golden hamsters, are social animals who crave contact with others of their species. Obtain both of your animals as litter mates or previous cage mates, or you will have difficulty getting them to accept each other. If one member of the pair or group dies, it is very difficult to replace and the remaining hamsters are best left alone since they typically pair for life.

Hamsters are very nocturnal and spend most of the day in a very deep sleep. If they are woken suddenly, even very tame animals may bite because they are frightened and a bit irritable when woken.

They have a very strong hoarding instinct, and they will fill their cheek pouches with food and bring it back to their nest where they will store it.

Handling/Grooming

Ease them into a corner and let them sniff you or feed them from your open palm to get them accustomed to being handled. Gently scoop them up and make sure to support them fully with your hand. Be careful to keep them over the cage, in case they jump out of your hand. If you have difficulty picking them up, use a can or cup to gently scoop them out of the cage. They can be fully tamed, and can allowed to run around on a table top or bed SUPERVISED.

Hamsters may rear up on their hind legs with paws upraised - this is a defensive posture and usually happens before they bite. Be careful not to confuse this with a hamster standing on its hind legs in curiosity. Always speak to them before handling them, since they recognize their handler's voice and their eyesight isn't always good. Do not wake them to play with them, as this may startle them and make them more likely to bite.