



Zoo, Avian, Aquatic and Unusual Pets  
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## Caring for your hamster



### Your hamster

The hamster is part of the cricetidae family of rodents which means burrowing rodent. Interestingly the Syrian hamsters we have in the UK today were bred from a single pairing originating from Jerusalem. As well as the Syrian hamster there are four commonly kept species of dwarf hamster; The Chinese hamster, the Roborovski hamster, the Russian dwarf Campbell hamster and the Russian dwarf winter white hamster.

Hamsters are popular pets due to their small, cute appearance, general lack of odour and apparent ease to keep. However, they are generally nocturnal and require a lot of handling and care otherwise they can be easily irritated and bite.

They can live between 1.5-2.5 years if cared for appropriately. Here are some following tips to help you care for your hamster and give them the best life possible!

### Hamster accommodation

#### **Cage size:**

A minimum cage size is discussed as 100cm X 50cm X 50cm (L x H x W) although this is based on limited scientific studies and larger is always better as hamsters love to explore and to burrow. It has also been noted in hamster cage size studies that the larger the enclosure the less likely the hamster will exhibit wire-gnawing behaviour<sup>(1)</sup>. With burrowing in mind an ideal depth of 25cm of substrate allows your hamster to exhibit normal burrowing behaviour.

#### **Cage design:**

The best cage designs consist of solid walls. Wire cages allow for hamsters to climb up the sides and top where they often lose their grip and end up falling, suffering back injuries or fractures. They will also not be able to exhibit wire gnawing which can damage their teeth.

As mentioned, the cage will be deep to allow for burrowing into their substrate. Popular substrate choices are paper based such as Carefresh as they have a tissue clump texture and are good for holding up the structure of a burrow.

Alternatively, a safe wood based bedding can be used such as Aspen. Please not this is not sawdust. Aspen doesn't produce harmful dust that could cause respiratory problems and irritate a hamsters eyes. Aspen will give another texture to the enclosure however, it's not great at holding up burrows on its own so another bedding such as paper bedding would need to be mixed with it.

Hamsters are ideally kept at temperatures between 18 °C and 26°C. Temperatures less than 5°C will result in your hamster hibernating. They can drop their respiration and heart rate considerably often making it difficult to detect if your hamster is still alive! A pet hamster should have no need to hibernate in the UK.

They should be kept in a damp and draft free area of the house away from any items that produce ultrasound. For example, televisions or computers. This is because a hamsters hearing is highly sensitive to these sound waves.

A Rotastack style cage where multiple cages are connected via tunnels are becoming increasingly less popular as evidence shows they are not large or deep enough and many hamsters like to bring their substrate or nest into a tunnel which limits their ventilation. The most ideal cage is made of glass or solid plastic with plenty of ventilation at the top.

### **Enrichment**

Providing plenty of substrate to burrow into allows your hamster to exhibit their natural activities. As hamsters travel large distances you can also provide a wheel to help them 'run' of their excess energy. The "Flying saucer" exercise wheels are preferable over "regular" exercise wheels to minimize the risk of back and limb problems. The larger "flying saucer" wheels do not force the animal into an abnormal hyperextended back position, but individuals can still develop limb problems due to abnormal loading of joints and muscles. Any wheel provided should be solid to prevent the inadvertent damaging or fracturing of a hind leg if it gets pushed between the wire slats.

Hiding food around your hamster's enclosure, within tubes and various hides will allow your hamster to exhibit normal foraging behaviour. Ditch the bowl unless you need to monitor your hamster's food intake for health reasons.

Hamsters have continuously growing teeth so you must provide them with suitable gnawing material to keep them down. Suitable chews can be made from untreated wood, sisal string, cardboard and paper.

Hamster balls are no longer recommended as they can be dangerous and cause undue stress. The following are reasons as to why we do not recommend a ball as an exercise activity:

- Hamsters rely heavily on their sense of touch, smell and hearing to get around and become stressed when they cannot use them effectively when in the ball.
- Hamsters have poor eyesight so are prone to bumping into things and can cause themselves fright and damage when they do this.
- They have no access to their food and water which can be very stressful to them.
- The constant running in this way (similar to an upright wheel that is too small) can cause damage to their back.
- A ball has very poor ventilation and often hamsters will defecate or urinate in the ball due to stress.

For further information on hamster balls please take a look at the RSPCA guidelines on them: <https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/rodents/hamsters/health>

It is much better for a hamster to be handled gently by you daily and placed into a playpen for you to interact with each other than to use a hamster ball. This way you can also check your hamster's health and spot any problems early.

### **Cage mates**

In general, all hamsters should be housed separately. They can become territorial and very aggressive with one another, regardless of their gender.

### **Hamster behaviour**

Hamsters are frequently accused of being aggressive. Usually this is due to rough handling or being disturbed in their nests. They are generally nocturnal so aren't a fan of being disturbed when sleeping. Monitor their daytime activity and gently handle them during their awake periods and overtime they will become used to you and can become very inquisitive and affectionate.

As mentioned above hamsters are very active burrowers so provide lots of substrate to keep them busy.

### **Handling your hamster**

Allow your hamster to become used to your hand and smell before attempting to pick them up. Do this frequently over a few days. You may even find that they will hop up onto your outstretched hand if given enough time.

When picking them up for the first few times you can dim the lights and reduce any noise to help them feel calmer. Cup one hand under your hamsters body so that they can grip onto your hand and feel secure. Use your other hand to loosely cover the top of your hamster to help prevent them from jumping out of your hand. Do not fully enclose your hamster into your hands as they will feel trapped and may become stressed.

Hamsters can be very quick so it is advisable to have a play pen close by in which to place them into so that they can not escape and get lost should they jump out of your hands.

### **Diet**

Hamsters are omnivores and should be fed a mix of mainly fruits and vegetables with the occasional protein rich food added in every few days. Always give your hamster a variety for them to gain different health benefits and to add enrichment to their day. Below are a few examples of safe foods that can be given:

#### **Fruits:**

- Apples
- Bananas
- Blueberries

- Cranberries
- Cucumber
- Dates
- Grapes
- Kiwi
- Peach
- Pear
- Raspberries
- Strawberries
- Tomato (No leaves or stems)



### **Vegetables/Plants**

- Asparagus
- Basil
- Broccoli
- Cabbage
- Carrot
- Cauliflower
- Dandelion
- Kale
- Mushrooms
- Parsnip
- Pepper
- Pumpkin
- Spinach
- Sweet potato (cooked)



### **Proteins**

- Boiled egg
- Cheese
- Chickpeas
- Cooked meats: chicken, turkey, salmon (not processed, packaged or smoked meat)
- Crickets
- Lentils
- Mealworms
- Nuts: Almonds, peanuts, walnuts
- Seeds: Sesame and sunflower

Do **NOT** feed blue cheeses, uncooked potatoes, rhubarb leaves or uncooked meats.

A good portion guide is to feed fresh foods that are the size of your hamster's ear.

Hamster nuggets can be fed alongside the fresh food but should not make up the whole of their diet as they do not contain enough of the correct nutrition. However the

pellets should be given over the seed or grain mixes that are available as they prevent your hamster from picking out just what they want ie. Just eating the fatty sunflower seeds and becoming fussy eaters.

Water should be provided in a drip bottle that does not leak. Check it daily to ensure it is not dripping and getting your hamsters enclosures wet. Hamsters should be kept nice and dry to prevent any health issues.

### **Medical conditions**

Commonly seen conditions include:

- Dental issues -overgrown incisors
- Diabetes
- Diarrhoea or 'wet tail'
- Respiratory infections
- Skin disease: Ringworm
- Tumours

Frequent handling of your hamster will allow you to spot any issues. Always ensure your hamster is eating and drinking their normal amount but also not struggling to do this. You should also ensure they are passing normal urine and faeces and again not struggling when they do this. If you notice any change in their behaviour this could be an early warning sign that something is wrong. Closely monitor your hamster and call us for an appointment should you be worried.

We recommend annual health checks with our vets to ensure your hamster is healthy and allow any problems to be addressed early.

### **Insurance**

Unfortunately, we can never predict what may happen to our hamsters, so we highly recommend getting pet insurance. A monthly fee can give you peace of mind knowing your pet is covered for the best treatment should anything happen. There are many insurance companies available, so we advise contacting each of them to find a policy that is right for you. We advise a policy that will cover your hamster for its whole lifetime, for chronic illnesses and for the maximum amount that is available. If this is not possible then covering your hamster for as much as you can afford will give you peace of mind should an accident or emergency occur.

We hope you have fun caring for your hamster. Please call us on 0333 800 1602 should you require an appointment.

### **References:**

1. Fischer, Katerina, S. G. Gebhardt-Henrich, and A. Steiger. (2005) Online. Available at: "Behaviour of golden hamsters (*Mesocricetus auratus*) kept in four different cage sizes."