



DIET

Hamster pellets and mixes are both available. Pellets provide a good, balanced diet, but offer hamsters no variety. Many hamsters will refuse them. Mixes can be a sound alternative, but many are high in fatty foods. Make sure your hamster has eaten all the mix in the dish before adding more. Otherwise, your hamster may pick out favourite high-fat foods, leaving the healthier alternatives. Supplement the feed with alfalfa pellets and fresh vegetables and fruits, such as spinach, lettuce, apple and cauliflower. A hayrack filled with hay can provide necessary roughage, and a salt lick can prevent mineral deficiencies. Never offer beans, apple seeds, parsley, tomatoes, or green or sprouted potatoes. All are poisonous to hamsters. Fresh water should be available at all times.

HEALTH

Find a veterinarian specializing in exotic animals and experienced in treating hamsters before you have an emergency. If your hamster is not eating or drinking, has diarrhea, seems irritable or prone to biting, is reluctant to move or walking stiffly, see a veterinarian immediately.

FERTILITY

Hamsters become sexually mature at six to eight weeks. Because it is difficult to find enough appropriate homes for them, breeding hamsters is strongly discouraged.



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A Quick Guide to Hamsters

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Introduced just 70 years ago, hamsters have become one of the most popular small pets. Frisky and fun to watch, hamsters tend to sleep during the day and play at night. Hamsters warm to human companions, but don't welcome the company of their own kind. A single hamster can provide hours of enjoyment as you watch your pet frolic and stuff his or her cheeks with seed. An average life span is 2 years.

Before adopting a pet hamster, consider the following:

- Hamsters need nutritious food, fresh water and a clean habitat daily.
- Hamsters need daily exercise and play.
- All household members should understand how to hold and play with a hamster, and they should all be as eager as you to welcome a hamster into the family.
- Hamsters are nocturnal, requiring cleaning, feeding and handling in the late afternoon or evening.
- A pet hamster may require taming.

SETTING UP HOUSE

Essential items:

- Spacious cage with solid bottom
- Shavings
- Hiding box (a cardboard box will do)
- Ceramic food bowl
- Water bottle
- Hamster mix or pellets
- Gnawing objects
- Nesting material
- Exercise wheel

Optional items

- Wooden ladders
- Tubes and tunnels
- Exercise ball
- Salt lick
- Hayrack
- Hay

GENERAL CARE

Hamsters are nocturnal and can become cranky if you disturb their daytime sleep. Try to limit cleaning, feeding and handling to the late afternoon and evening. Accommodate your hamster's natural rhythms, and you will find an eager companion. However, hamsters don't seek the companionship of their own kind. Introducing another hamster is not advised. If you allow your hamster outside the cage, supervise him very carefully — a hamster can be difficult to find, and if there's a place to hide, a hamster will find it! Hamsters also have poor eyesight and may walk right off the edge of a table or chair. Your hamster can explore your house safely in a plastic exercise ball, but she will still need to be closely supervised. Hamsters can easily be injured by a tumble down the stairs or an unintentional kick.

HANDLING

Some hamsters can come home already accustomed to handling, others require time to adjust to your touch. If your hamster is reluctant to be handled, spend time near the cage, speaking quietly. Progress to hand feeding his favourite treats and, finally, you'll be able to gently scoop up your hamster. To pick up a hamster, gently scoop him into the palm of one hand, with your other hand placed gently over the hamster's back to prevent jumping. If you are looking for a child's pet that can be easily handled, a hamster may not be the right choice.



HOUSING

Place your hamster's home in a dimly lit room, away from drafts, direct sunlight and noise. Find a location that will allow the hamster to sleep during the day and family members to sleep at night. Select a spacious cage with a solid, deep bottom. You can choose from wire cages, aquariums and plastic cages. Plastic cages full of tubes and tunnels can be fun for a hamster, but lack ventilation and can be hard to clean. Hamsters have been known to gnaw through the plastic. Aquariums are easier to clean, but require a top that allows adequate ventilation. A wire cage will require bars no more than a half-inch apart. Check any cage closely for secure fastenings. Hamsters love to escape!

Line the bottom of the cage with any safe bedding. Cover the floor with bedding such as aspen shavings, recycled paper or corncob bedding. Avoid cedar shavings, which contain harmful oils. Since hamsters are solitary, private animals, your pet will appreciate a hiding house. An old cardboard box will double as a gnawing object. Shred white, unscented tissues to provide nesting material.

Hamsters are orderly creatures, so place a sturdy ceramic food dish well away from the sleeping and bathroom areas and attach a sipper bottle to the cage. Some hamsters enjoy an exercise wheel. Many hamsters do well on metal wheels with rungs, but you should monitor your pet carefully to make sure she is not injuring her feet. Offer other safe materials for playing and gnawing as well. Commercial products are available, but old toilet paper and towel rolls can provide hours of gnawing and romping. Dog biscuits or twigs from a pesticide-free beech, maple or fruit tree will help keep your hamster's teeth properly worn down.

Keep your hamster's habitat clean by removing soiled litter daily and removing stockpiles of perishable food. Clean the sipper bottle and tube daily to prevent the build up of food and bacteria. Wash the food dish and cage weekly. Always rinse and dry the cage well before adding clean bedding and returning your pet.