

Hamsters as Pets

History and Biology: Hamsters are rodents and are in a subfamily which contains about 25 different species. The golden hamster, which is common in the pet trade, was first captured and domesticated in Syria by a scientist in Jerusalem. Other species include Campbell's dwarf hamster, the Chinese striped hamster and the Angora hamster, also known as the teddy bear hamster, which is actually a type of golden hamster. The largest is the European hamster which measures over a foot long, not including the tail. This species is not domesticated and not kept as a common pet.

Hamsters are generally crepuscular to nocturnal, being active at dawn and dusk. They will often remain awake all night. During the day they will burrow underground to avoid predators. Hamsters may live from 3-4 years in captivity as pets.

Anatomy and Physiology:

- Hamsters have stout bodies with short tails that are often difficult to see. They have poor eyesight, are nearsighted and colorblind. Hamsters rely on their sense of smell to locate food and distinguish other individuals. They have the ability to hear and communicate in the ultrasonic range, and are sensitive to high-pitched sounds.
- Hamsters have scent glands along their flanks which leave a scent trail. The Chinese and dwarf hamsters also have scent glands on their abdomen.
- A hamster's incisors (front teeth) grow continuously.
- Hamsters have cheek pouches which they use to carry food until it can be stashed in a safe place. When full, these can make the hamster look two or three times its normal size.

Housing:

- Cages may be wire but should have a solid bottom. Bedding should be thick. Avoid pine, cedar or any clay-based bedding or litter. Hard wood shavings or paper are appropriate. Whatever is selected, be sure the bedding is as dust free as possible.
- Hamsters are excellent diggers and will construct elaborate burrows with multiple entrances if given adequate bedding. In the wild, burrow construction helps maintain more stable ambient temperatures.
- Hamsters are extremely sensitive to rapid temperature changes and drafts. Extreme cold and heat should also be avoided.

Diet:

- Clean, fresh water should always be available. Using a water bottle with a ball-valve is recommended. The bottles should be cleaned regularly. Brushes are available at most pet stores to clean water bottles.
- A high-quality hamster should be fed. Seed mixes are not appropriate, and may cause gastrointestinal upset, obesity and other disease. A high quality grass or timothy hay should be available at all times. Leafy greens can account for up to 15 percent of the diet.
- If on a well-balanced diet, hamsters do not need supplements or salt licks. These may cause an imbalance of certain minerals and nutrients which may lead to health problems.
- Because of their unique gastrointestinal anatomy, hamsters are very sensitive to foods high in sugar. Fruit and other high sugar vegetables, such as baby carrots, bell pepper, tomatoes and corn should be severely restricted. Yogurt drops and seed treats are not appropriate. **If a hamster stops eating, even if it is only for 24 hours, this is a medical emergency, and he/she should be seen by a veterinarian as soon as possible.**

Socialization and Behavior:

- Most hamsters are solitary. If housed together, they may fight to the death. Russian hamsters may form close, monogamous bonds with their mates and become very depressed when separated.
- Hamsters do carry food in their cheek pouches and will carry it to a safe place to stash.

Veterinary Care:

- Finding a good veterinarian is recommended. Hamsters should have routine physical exams every 6 months. Manifestation of a health condition is often rapid due to their fast metabolic rates, so early detection is important. Ideally, your hamster should have an exam after purchase or adoption, and every 6 months after his or her first exam.