

Caring For Your Hamster

Hamster Care: Your Guide to Happy, Healthy Hamsters

Hamsters are some of the most beloved small pets out there! They're charming little creatures with lots of personality. The most well-known variety is the Syrian hamster, often called the "golden hamster." But there are also four dwarf species you might consider: the Winter White, Campbell's Dwarf, Chinese, and Roborovski. Each one has its own unique traits and care requirements, so it's essential to know a bit about them before bringing one home.



Is a Hamster the Right Pet for You?

Hamsters can make fantastic pets, but they do need the right kind of care to thrive. If you're thinking about adding one to your family, especially if you have young kids, keep in mind that these little guys are nocturnal. They're most active at night and don't usually enjoy being picked up during the day when they're snoozing. However, watching their natural behaviours can be a lot of fun, and kids can help with feeding and cleaning.

Here are a few things to consider before diving in:

- **Lifespan:** Hamsters typically live for about 2 to 3 years.
- **Social Needs:** Most hamsters are solitary by nature and do not need a buddy to be happy. They can even get territorial and fight if kept together, especially the Syrian and other dwarf species. If you choose a Roborovski, they can sometimes live in same-sex pairs, but it's important to keep an eye on them to prevent fights.

Common Questions About Hamsters

- **What if my Roborovski hamsters fight?** If that happens, it's crucial to separate them immediately into different cages. Hamsters don't play-fight, so any signs of aggression should be taken seriously. The best prevention is to ensure they have ample space and plenty of toys to keep them engaged.
- **Do hamsters bite?** While they rarely bite if handled gently from a young age, they might nip if they feel startled or scared. Always wait for your hamster to fully wake up before trying to interact.
- **Do hamsters hibernate?** Not in the traditional sense! Wild hamsters don't hibernate, but pet hamsters can go into a state called "torpor" if they get too cold or don't have enough food. This can be risky, so it's vital to keep their



environment stable and warm.

Where to Find Hamsters

Animal Charities: Consider adopting from a rescue organisation! Many hamsters end up in shelters, and giving one a home can be a fulfilling experience.

Breeders and Pet Shops: If you decide to buy one, ensure you choose a responsible breeder or a reputable pet store. Here's what to look for:

- Ensure they can correctly sex the hamsters to prevent unwanted litters.
- Look for healthy animals that are at least six weeks old and living in clean, spacious conditions.

Hamsters generally cost between £10 to £20, but adoption fees often include a vet check.

What Do You Need to Get Started?

Here's a quick list of essentials for your new hamster:

- A spacious cage (minimum size: 100cm x 50cm x 50cm)
- Suitable bedding for burrowing
- Healthy hamster food
- Multi-chamber hide
- Water bottle or bowl
- Playpen
- Cardboard tubes
- Fun toys
- A carry case for vet trips
- An exercise wheel
- A sand bath for grooming



Creating a Cozy Home

Hamsters love to explore, so providing a larger cage is always a plus! Tanks are a great option because they allow for deeper bedding and reduce escape risks. Just make sure

there's a mesh lid for ventilation and that any gaps are less than 1cm wide to keep your furry friend safe.

When it comes to bedding, you want something that's dust-extracted, like paper-based or hemp bedding. Avoid fluffy bedding like hamster wool, as it can cause health issues if ingested.

Cleaning Your Hamster's Home

How often you clean the cage depends on its size and your hamster's habits. Generally, aim for a thorough clean once or twice a month, but spot clean every few days by removing soiled bedding and uneaten food. Here's a step-by-step guide:

1. Wait until your hamster is awake.
2. Gently move them to a pet carrier or playpen.
3. Take out toys and hides, cleaning them as needed.
4. Scoop out old bedding but save some unsoiled bedding for familiarity.
5. Use a pet-safe disinfectant to clean the cage and then wipe it down with warm water.
6. Let everything air dry.
7. Clean food bowls and water bottles.
8. Refill the cage with toys and plenty of deep bedding, including some of the saved bedding.

Exercise and Playtime



While hamster exercise balls might seem fun, they can actually be dangerous because they limit ventilation and prevent your hamster from accessing food or water. Instead, create a safe area for them to play, like a hamster playpen.

When it comes to exercise wheels, ensure the wheel is large enough for your hamster to run comfortably without bending their back. Here are some recommended sizes:

- Syrian: 27-32 cm
- Campbell's Dwarf: 22-25 cm
- Winter White: 22-25 cm
- Roborovski: 20-22 cm
- Chinese Dwarf: 25-27 cm

Enrichment

Hamsters are such curious little creatures, and they thrive on the ability to explore their surroundings! They love to dig tunnels, build cozy nests, and forage for their food, so creating an engaging environment for them is key. Start by adding deep bedding material with a mix of textures. Think of it as their own little playground!

A sand bath is a fantastic addition to their cage, allowing them to keep their fur clean while enjoying a new texture to explore. This is especially important for Roborovski hamsters, who hail from desert environments and love a good sandy dig.

Don't forget to include wide tunnels and safe wooden branches, like cork logs or grapevine branches. These create a fun and interesting landscape for your little



explorer to scamper around in!

Playpen

When setting up a playpen for your hamster, ensure the sides are tall and secure to prevent any escape attempts. You want to keep your little friend safe while they enjoy their time outside of their cage! If you choose a wire playpen, make sure the bars are vertical and narrow enough (at least 9mm for dwarf hamsters) to keep them from

squeezing through. If you're worried, you can always reinforce the sides with sturdy cardboard.

Since hamsters can be a bit shy, it's best to start with a smaller playpen. This helps reduce any stress they might feel in a big, open space. Fill it with toys, food, water, and plenty of hides and tunnels to encourage exploration and help them feel secure. As they get more comfortable, you can gradually increase the size of their playpen.

Important Note: Always keep an eye on your hamster when they're in their playpen, and never wake them up to move them in. Wait until they're awake and ready to explore!

Nest Box

Every hamster needs a cozy hideout to sleep in. A multi-chamber hide is perfect since they prefer to snooze away from the entrance. Cardboard boxes are also great; you can connect a few together using cardboard tubes for extra fun! Just remember to cut a hole in the bottom of the box, so they can burrow down into their bedding. Filling their hide with shredded soft paper or bedding will make it feel like a warm little nest.



Activity Feeding

Scatter feeding is a wonderful way to tap into your hamster's natural foraging instincts. You can spread their dry food around the cage and even hide some under the bedding for them to sniff out. Adding sprays of seeds and safe plants will create a more natural foraging experience for your furry friend!



Hamster Food

Just like us, hamsters are omnivores, which means they need a mix of plant and animal-based foods. A quality commercial hamster mix serves as a great base for their diet. To keep things exciting, you can introduce small pieces of fresh food, too! Think of portions no bigger than your hamster's ear. Good options include most vegetables, mealworms, lean cooked meat, and boiled egg. If you have a Syrian hamster, they can enjoy small pieces of fruit as an occasional treat.

Treats

Hamsters need to gnaw to keep their continuously growing front teeth in check. You can offer them small, hard treats like fruit tree sticks or even tiny dog biscuits. Just remember, moderation is key! And don't forget to provide fresh water every day—whether in a bottle or a small bowl, just make sure to change it daily.

Fun Fact: It's perfectly normal for hamsters to munch on their poop! They do this to keep their gut healthy, just like many other rodents.



How Much Should I Feed My Hamster?

Make sure to read the instructions on your hamster's food packaging carefully. Portion sizes matter, as hamsters can pack on the pounds pretty quickly! Avoid sugary or fatty treats, especially those sticky seed sticks with molasses or honey.

If you notice your hamster gaining weight or not eating enough, a quick visit to the vet can help ease your mind. Remember, hamsters love to hoard food in their beds, so be careful not to give them too many green veggies that might rot. Watching them stuff their cheek pouches is always a cute sight!

While it's essential to remove any uneaten food, allow your hamster to keep some of their hoard. If you ever have to take it away completely, replace it with a similar amount of fresh food mixed with a little of the old stuff to help reduce stress.

How to Feed My Hamster

Hamsters adore fresh fruits and veggies but have a tendency to bury their food. To minimise the risk of it rotting, give them tiny portions and be sure to remove any uneaten food daily. Scatter feeding, rather than using a bowl, is a great way to encourage their natural foraging behaviour.

How to Keep Hamsters Healthy

Just like any pet, hamsters have their quirks and health concerns. For instance, did you know that Syrian hamsters have scent glands on either side of their flanks? These little dark patches are normal, symmetrical, and shouldn't change in size. Dwarf hamsters, on the other hand, have scent glands on their tummies, which might look like tiny belly buttons!

As spring rolls around, male hamsters may have enlarged testicles—this is usually nothing to worry about. However, if you're ever concerned about your hamster's health, don't hesitate to reach out to your vet.



Common Illnesses

Just like other pets, hamsters can face health issues.

Lodged Food: While it's adorable to see your hamster with stuffed cheeks, it can sometimes cause problems. If it seems like your hamster can't get the food out of their pouch, that's known as impacted cheek pouches. In such cases, always consult with your vet, especially if there's a chance of infection.

Diarrhoea (Wet Tail): This is another condition that requires veterinary attention, especially if it's associated with stress in newly weaned babies. To minimise the risk, prepare their cage in advance and leave them undisturbed for the first few days after bringing them home.

Eyesight: Keep in mind that hamsters are short-sighted, particularly those with pink eyes. If you let them out of their cage, watch them closely, as their poor depth perception can lead to falls.

Skin Conditions: Hamsters can also be prone to mites and ringworm, so check for any itchy, red patches or bald spots. If you suspect a skin issue, reach out to your vet right away.

Bladder Stones: These mineral lumps can form in their bladders, causing symptoms like frequent urination, discoloured urine, or blood in their urine. If you notice these signs, make sure to get them to the vet promptly.

Cancer: Regularly check your hamster for any unusual lumps or bumps, and consult your vet if you spot anything concerning.

Should I Allow My Hamsters to Mate?

Hamsters can start mating as young as four weeks old. A pair can produce a litter every three to four weeks, with each litter averaging eight to ten babies! It's a bit shocking, but females can even become pregnant within 24 hours of giving birth.

For this reason, it's strongly advised not to breed hamsters. If you introduce a male and female when the female isn't in season, it could lead to serious fights. Remember, there are plenty of hamsters in animal shelters looking for loving homes!



How to Handle Your Hamster

The earlier you start handling your hamster, the better! Begin by placing your hand in their cage, allowing them to sniff and get used to your presence. Offer them treats from your hand to build a positive association with you.

When you're ready to pick them up, gently form a cup with both hands around their body. Always keep them close to a safe surface like a table or your lap to prevent any falls.

If your hamster seems nervous, make sure they're awake and then hold your hand in the cage without trying to touch them. This allows them to get used to your smell and

presence. Eventually, they'll become more comfortable, and you can even encourage them into a tunnel or hide to scoop them up more easily.

Tip: Avoid putting your hand into your hamster's bed, as they may be fast asleep and get startled.