



# Introduction to Hamster and Gerbil Care

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Due to their small size and adorable features, hamsters and gerbils are popular pets. Though they are considered "low-maintenance" pets compared to others animals, it is important to understand their basic needs to ensure a happy and healthy companion.

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## Housing

Aquariums are the preferred housing, rather than wired cages. Hamsters and gerbils love to climb and may get their feet, limbs, or head caught between the bars. Smooth-sided aquariums reduce the chances of trauma or broken bones from the housing environment. This also helps to keep bedding in the enclosure so your pet can burrow. A secured screen or wire mesh top should be used to contain your pet and provide airflow/ventilation. Clean the aquarium routinely to reduce the chances of disease and increase her quality of life. Wash the aquarium with diluted soap and water weekly.

Keep your pet's enclosure at room temperature. Do not leave the enclosure in areas that are excessively hot or cold.

## Bedding & Enrichment

Carefresh (recycled paper) is an excellent bedding choice for your pet. Do not use wood shavings such as pine or cedar, as these may cause upper respiratory issues.

An exercise wheel is a good source of physical activity. Tunnels are fun for your pet to run through and will also provide entertainment and exercise. Chew toys made of untreated/unpainted blocks of wood are entertaining and help to keep their teeth healthy. Hamsters



and gerbils have teeth that constantly grow, so having access to chew toys is important to prevent the teeth from overgrowing. Overgrowth will cause medical issues.

## Diet

Hamsters and gerbils should be fed a high-quality hamster or gerbil-specific pelleted food to provide them with complete nutrition. Oxbow Animal Health makes ideal hamster and gerbil foods. We do not recommend feeding your pet a mixed seed/nut diet, because they will pick their preferred foods and leave the healthy items behind.

Hay should be offered to encourage natural foraging behavior, and provide good nesting material.

Fresh vegetables can also be fed daily. Just be sure to throw away any uneaten vegetables so they do not spoil. It is best to feed your hamster fresh vegetables at night when your pet is most active.

Feeding treats is a great way to bond with your pet, but only in moderation. Fresh vegetables and fruits such as strawberry or banana in small amounts (due to the sugar content) are good choices. Oxbow Animal Health makes timothy-hay-based treats that provide a healthy option. Avoid processed treats like yogurt drops, and foods that are high in sugar and fat.

Fresh water should be available at all times. Water bottles are preferred over water bowls, as these pets tend to get bedding in the bowl and splash water onto the bedding around it. Wet bedding is a nice place for bacteria and mold to grow. Clean your pet's water bottle often.

## Handling & Behavior

Hamsters and gerbils vary in their behavior when being handled. Hamsters are nocturnal (awake at night), and care should be taken to avoid startling them when they are asleep. Hamsters tend to become biters when they are not well-socialized, so it's important to handle your hamster often. Gerbils, on the other hand, are very active and are not nocturnal. They rarely bite. Be sure to scoop up your gerbil to handle them. Never pick up a gerbil by the tail, as this can cause serious injury. Hamsters and gerbils can be squirmy, which puts them at risk of falling out of your hands. Handle them close to the floor or a safe surface until you get used to their movements.

Both hamsters and gerbils love to stash food in their environment. It is common to find their food bowl empty, with traces of food all over their cage. Hamsters have cheek pouches for storing and transporting food and materials. It may look odd when they stuff and empty these

pouches, but it is normal. Both hamsters and gerbils also participate in coprophagia, which means they will eat their own feces. This is natural and provides them with essential nutrients.

## **Preventive Care**

We recommend that you bring in your hamster or gerbil yearly for a wellness exam. Based on the exam, your veterinarian will make recommendations for how you can optimize your pet's health. Hamsters should have a fecal examination (a test from a stool sample) annually to ensure that they are free of intestinal parasites.