

# Caring for Gerbils

## (*Meriones unguiculatus*)

Gerbils were first imported from the Mongolian desert into the United States in the 1950s. The upper part of the gerbil body is colored, ranging from pale yellow to black, but is generally brownish. The underside is white and the tip of the tail is bushy.

Gerbils have large adrenal glands, which is typical of water-conserving desert rodents, and a large abdominal marking gland, most prominent in the males.

Gerbils are very friendly. They are social animals and do not like being alone at all. It is best to have two gerbils of the same sex that come from the same litter.



### BIOLOGICAL INFORMATION

- Life span: 2-5 years
- Adult body weight: 55-100 g (2-3.4 oz)
- Sexual maturity: 10-12 weeks
- Estrous cycle: 4-6 days
- Gestation: 24-26 days
- Litter size: 1-12 (average 3-7)
- Weaning age: 21-25 days
- Adult daily food intake: 7 g or 1/4 oz rodent pelleted diet
- Activity: very active, diurnal (active during the day)

### Housing Requirements

Gerbils are generally housed in aquaria or similar types of containment, with wire mesh lids to provide air and prevent escape. The cage should be of a height that allows the animals to freely stand on their back legs and of a size that provides 36 square inches per adult. Gerbils require bedding to help keep a clean environment and to allow for their burrowing behavior. Bedding may be wood chips, wood shavings, pelleted cellulose, or similar materials at a level of approximately 2 inches or more in the cage. Pine and cedar chips should be avoided because of potentially toxic effects, especially on the young. The bedding should be changed weekly, and the cage should be cleaned at that time with detergent and water. The cage should be rinsed thoroughly and dried before replacing the bedding.

Gerbils are very active and should have environmental enrichment equipment, such as an exercise wheel, hollow tubes, or mazes.

As desert animals, gerbils are susceptible to the effects of high humidity. Consistently high humidity will cause them to have rough hair coats, sometimes with a greasy consistency. It may also be a predisposing factor for a more serious condition known as sore nose. It is best to keep gerbils in an environment of less than 50% humidity and a room temperature between 60–80°F (15.5–26.5°C). A small container of clean sand in the cage for sand bathing helps to maintain their hair coat and skin in good condition. The sand should be changed as often as the bedding.

### Food and Water

In the wild, gerbils eat a wide variety of seeds, roots, fruits, cereals, and vegetables, as well as some insects. Providing gerbils with pelleted rodent food, available through pet stores, can satisfy their dietary needs, and the gnawing will help prevent incisor overgrowth. The diet should be a balanced ration and not limited to one food substance, such as sunflower seeds. Some ingredients in rodent feed, such as vitamins, lose their potency over time, so caution should be taken to store the food in dark, cool environments and never for longer than six months. Feed can be provided in a feeder or on the floor of the cage. The water supply should come from a bottle with a sipper tube, attached to the side of the cage. Adult daily water intake is about 4 ml (1/6 fl. oz).

### Handling

Gerbils are gentle animals and generally do not bite, especially when handled regularly. Never pick a gerbil up by the tail alone; doing so can severely injure the tail. Gerbils may be picked up by the scruff of the neck while supporting the rest

of the body with the other hand. They will also walk freely onto the palm of an open hand.

The skin covering the tail is very delicate and may detach from the tail with even moderately rough handling. If this traumatic event occurs, seek the help of a veterinarian.

A significant percentage of gerbils have epileptic-like seizures as a reaction to loud noises, stress, or fright. This condition requires no treatment.

## Diseases

Gerbils are not susceptible to many infectious diseases. The most common infectious disease found in gerbils is Tyzzer's disease, which affects the liver and intestinal tract. Infected animals may not show any symptoms except for weight loss, but sometimes diarrhea is present. Gerbils can also get intestinal parasites.

Sick animals generally have rough hair coats, decreased activity, and decreased appetite.

The most common condition affecting gerbils is facial eczema, also known as sore nose. The clinical signs of the disease are a moist dermatitis on the face, which generally causes the animals to scratch the affected area. The cause of the condition is complex and is related to increased excretions from Harderian glands in the eyes, sometimes in combination with a staphylococcal (staph) infection.

If an animal is noted to have any of the symptoms mentioned in this section, veterinary advice should be sought.

## Human Health Concerns

Seek the advice of a physician if bite wounds or signs of allergies occur due to contact with gerbils.



## Resources

1. Gerbils, chapter in *Assistant Laboratory Animal Technician Training Manual*, 2008, American Association for Laboratory Animal Science, Memphis, TN.
2. Contact your veterinarian or a local veterinary school or veterinary technology program to get more information about this animal species.