

Caring for Hamsters

(*Mesocricetus auratus*)

The Golden or Syrian hamster is the most common of the hamster species found as a pet. In the wild, they live in barren environments in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, usually in deep tunnels that provide cool temperatures and high humidity.

Hamsters are solitary animals and roam widely at night seeking food. They have cheek pouches that are used to store food during foraging. They also have pigmented flank glands that serve as marking glands, which are more prominent in males.

The most common color is reddish brown with a grayish white underside. Color variations include albino, cinnamon, piebald, and cream. They have short tails and very loose skin.

Hamsters will hibernate if exposed to prolonged periods of cold (below 5°C or 40°F). They are docile, males more so than females. Hamsters do not bite when they are used to being handled and if they are not startled or awakened suddenly.



BIOLOGICAL INFORMATION

- Life span: 1.5–2.5 years
- Adult body weight: 85–140 g (3–5 oz); females larger than males
- Sexual maturity: males, 6–8 weeks; females, 8–12 weeks
- Estrous cycle: 4 days
- Gestation: 16 days
- Litter size: 4–12
- Weaning age: 20–25 days
- Adult daily food intake: 10–15 g ($\frac{1}{3}$ –1 oz)
- Activity: mostly sleep during the day and active at night (nocturnal)

Housing Requirements

Pet hamsters are usually housed singly since adults have a tendency to fight. A hamster requires a cage with bedding materials, such as hardwood chips, hardwood shavings, cellulose chips, or corncob pellets. Cedar and pine chips should not be used; they are abrasive, not absorbent, and potentially toxic. 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.

The cages must have tight-fitting lids because hamsters are good escape artists. It is recommended that the cages provide at least 20 square inches of floor area per hamster and be at least 6 inches high.

Hamsters require exercise and should have items, such as an exercise wheel or tunneled trails made of plastic tubing, to provide environmental enrichment.

Room temperature should be in the range of 64–79°F (18–26°C) with 40–60% humidity.

Food and Water

Hamsters can be fed commercial pelleted rodent food to provide a balanced ration. Care should be taken to avoid feeding one type of seed, such as sunflower seeds, as a complete ration. These seeds are too high in oils and have a low nutritional value; however, supplemental fruits, vegetables, and seeds can be provided as a treat. Pelleted food should be stored in a cool, dark place for a maximum of six months.

Hamsters prefer to have their food on the floor of the cage and can be supplied fresh drinking water from a water bottle with a sipper tube. The food and water containers should be cleaned on the same schedule as the cage.

Handling

Hamsters are noted for their ability to deliver painful bites. This is especially true for strangers; hamsters tend to not bite persons they are familiar with. Some bites may require treatment by a physician. Most hamsters which have been handled from a

very young age will remain docile and rarely bite. Unless the hamster has been trained to walk into the palm of an open hand, it should be grasped quickly and firmly around the shoulders and sides of the neck. The loose skin on the back of the neck can also be grasped. Hamsters can also be moved by inducing them to walk into a transport container, like a small tin can.

Diseases

Hamsters are susceptible to a wide variety of bacterial, viral, fungal, and parasitic diseases. Sick animals tend to become inactive and develop a ruffled hair coat. Diarrhea is a common sign of disease. Hamsters are susceptible to a condition known as proliferative ileitis or wet tail, which has a high fatality rate, when they are young. Pneumonia is another common type of infectious disease. Hair loss and itching can be signs of parasites or ringworm. Hamsters may develop fatal reactions to many antibiotics; the advice of a veterinarian should be sought prior to treating a sick animal.

Human Health Concerns

Some diseases of hamsters can be contagious to humans. Rarely, pet hamsters may harbor the virus lymphocytic choriomeningitis virus (LCMV), which may infect people. Wild rodents are the primary carriers of this virus and could be a source to contaminate classroom rodents. Washing hands with soap and water after handling pet rodents is recommended. Seek the advice of a physician if a human disease is suspected due to contact with hamsters.

Resources

1. Hamsters, 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.

