



Tips for you and your pet hamster

Hamsters are friendly, inquisitive, entertaining animals who make very good pets for children and adults. They can learn to enjoy the warmth and closeness of their human caretakers and their often unique personalities ensure their standing as popular members of the family. Their only real disadvantage is their relatively short life span.

This outline is a basic guide to hamster care and should by no means replace the advice of a North Idaho Animal Hospital veterinarian who specializes in this area.

General: The most common hamster found in pet stores is the Golden or Syrian hamster. They originated in the Middle East and Southeastern Europe. In the wild, hamsters live in deep burrows where they may store as much as several pounds of grain.

Hamsters are nocturnal animals, meaning that they are active primarily at night, with short periods of daytime activity.

The hamster's popularity as a pet has increased due to several factors; their availability, affordability, and small size. The only real drawback to hamster ownership is their relatively short life span.

Hamsters come in many colors, including the "wild" type, red-brown, cinnamon, cream, white, and piebald, as well as the popular "teddy bear", and long-haired, hamster.

Hamsters have large cheek pouches, which are used for food storage and transport.

Pouches are able to expand tremendously and extend as far back as the shoulders.

Dark brown patches, or flank glands, can be found over each hip. These glands are used to mark the hamster's territory. The flank glands are larger and more noticeable on male hamsters.

Nutrition: Hamsters are omnivorous, meaning that they eat both meat and vegetable matter but their total nutritional requirements have **not** yet been determined. Hamsters seem to do well on commercial pelleted rodent diets. The pellets can be supplemented with sugarless breakfast cereals, whole-wheat bread, uncooked pasta, cooked chicken, tuna, cheese, and fruits and vegetables. Always wash all produce before feeding it to your hamster. Pesticides and bacteria can sometimes be found on supermarket produce. Traditional seed diets contain a lot of oil - these diets can quickly become rancid. Obese hamsters result from feeding a strictly seed diet.

Housing, The Cage: The cage can be made of stainless steel, plastic, or glass.

Hamsters are said to require 20 square inches of floor area per animal. The height of the cage should be at least 6 inches. The flooring should be solid, with deep bedding and nesting material.

Pet stores sell plastic enclosures with both horizontal and vertical tubes - these enclosures are well-suited for hamsters.

Hamsters are masters of escape - make very sure that the enclosure is "escape-proof."

Free-roaming hamsters gnaw on phone and electrical wires, as well as risk being stepped on. Make sure that your hamster is well contained at all times, for his safety.

Bedding: Clean, non-toxic, absorbent and dust-free bedding should be provided. We recommend the use of shredded butcher's wrap or newspaper as bedding. Tissues can be offered as nesting material. The bedding should be changed regularly (at **least** once per week).

Compatibility: Sexually mature female hamsters should not be housed together, as they are very aggressive towards one another. Breeding females are physically bigger than males, and very aggressive. Male hamsters should be removed from the cage as soon as breeding has been completed (if you desire to breed your hamster) to prevent injuries from the female.

Food and Water Dishes: Your hamster should be fed in a ceramic bowl. They are not as easily tipped or contaminated by feces and urine. We recommend the use of a water bottle and sipper tube, rather than a water dish. The sipper tube should be checked regularly to make sure it is not clogged, and that your hamster is receiving an adequate water supply. Food and water dishes should be washed and disinfected daily.

Handling/Restraint: When handling or restraining your hamster, you may want to use a glove or a towel, as hamsters can deliver a nasty bite. Hamsters may be held in one hand with the hamster resting against your body. Be very careful not to drop your hamster, or accidentally kick its exercise ball as serious spinal injuries can result. If you want to handle a hamster while it is asleep, you should awaken it before attempting to pick it up. Otherwise it might be alarmed and try to defend itself against a perceived unknown threat and bite.

Antibiotics: Never give antibiotics to your hamster, unless they have been prescribed by a veterinarian. Hamsters are very sensitive to antibiotics, and if improperly used they can kill your pet. We recommend the use of yogurt (1/10 tsp. orally, twice per day) while your pet is receiving antibiotic therapy, and for 5 days thereafter.

Signs of Illness

- Swelling
- Decreased appetite
- Labored or rapid breathing
- Discharge from eyes or nose
- Lethargy/depression
- Incoordination
- Diarrhea
- Hair loss
- Parasites
- Weight Loss

Biological Data

Average Life Span	10-24 months
Body Weight	85-150 gms
Breeding Age	Male 10-14 weeks Female 6-10 weeks
Estrous Cycle	4 days
Gestation Period	15-16 days
Litter Size	5-9
Weaning Age	20-25 days

Hamsters, like dogs and cats, benefit from an annual examination by your North Idaho Animal Hospital veterinarian.

From Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine