



Shantock Hall Lane, Bovington, HP3 0NQ  
Tel: 01442 833198  
info@hopevets.com  
www.hopevets.com

## **Caring for your Gerbil**

Gerbils are fascinating pets and will fit in well with most families. They are inquisitive, rarely bite and are found in many colours, from the usual brown and grey with a light belly – called agouti – to golden, cream, black and blue. There are about 90 species, but the Mongolian gerbil is the one kept as a pet. They are sometimes mistaken for mice or rats, but there are physical and behavioural differences. Gerbils have long, hairy tails and, as you will find out, are serious diggers!

Because gerbils originate from desert and dry grassland areas they produce little urine and waste, so it is fairly easy to keep their environment clean and free from smells. They are very sociable and should not be kept alone. However, they breed from three months old and can produce a litter of four to ten babies every 24 days, so it is best to keep pairs or small groups of the same sex.

Males become sexually mature at 70 to 80 days old and females at 86 to 109 days. Females can become pregnant again within 24 hours of giving birth, so it is important that males and females are kept separate. The staff in the pet shop should be able to sex the animals accurately and show you how to tell the difference.

### **Home comforts**

In the wild, gerbils live in underground tunnels up to 3m long with several entries and chambers. The best way to mimic this natural habitat, and keep them happy, is to house them in a large tank or old aquarium with a secure wire lid and plenty of material for them to dig and tunnel into. Wire cages are unsuitable because the bedding will be kicked out.

A pair of gerbils need a tank with a minimum floor surface of 40cm x 75cm, by at least 30cm tall because they are such good jumpers. Place the tank or aquarium away from draughts and direct sunlight or heat. As these little animals are active during the evening – and occasionally during the day – you may not want to keep their tank in a bedroom. You are not likely to disturb them, but they may disturb you!

Gerbils need a thick layer of bedding material to dig into, such as peat moss which is sometimes with dust extracted wood shavings, plus shredded paper for nesting. Do not use fluffy bedding material as this can wrap around your gerbils' limbs and injure them. Your gerbils will also appreciate a nest box – but not made of wood or plastic, which will be chewed. A clay flowerpot cut in half makes a good sleeping area. A dust bath of chinchilla sand (available from most pet shops) should be provided to enable the gerbil to keep its coat clean and in good condition.

### ***Food for thought***

Most gerbil owners like to feed commercial mixes as the basis of their pets' diet, but they should also be given fresh vegetables and fruit. Earthenware or stainless steel feed bowls should be used. Do not worry about them burying their feed bowl under their bedding, as it is natural for them to store and hoard food.

Gerbils enjoy apples, carrots, broccoli, sprouts and cauliflower. Lettuce can be given occasionally, but only in very small amounts. Do not feed potatoes, rhubarb or tomato leaves, as these are poisonous. Also ensure your gerbils have a constant supply of fresh water. This should be provided in a free-access water bottle fixed inside the tank, as water bowls will be knocked over or buried.

### ***Health matters***

A healthy gerbil has bright eyes, a glossy coat and is alert and lively – except in the daytime when it is sleepy. A running or sticky nose or eyes, a dull coat and/or lethargy are signs of ill health, so you should call if you spot any of these. Like other rodents, gerbils have upper incisor teeth that continue to grow throughout their lives. They keep them at the right length by gnawing on things, so provide a small branch from a fruit tree, such as apple (check it has not been sprayed with pesticides) or wooden chew toys available from pet shops.

### ***Exercise and entertainment***

Gerbils love to dig and burrow, so make sure they have enough bedding to do this to their hearts' content. They have enormous fun with cardboard tubes, such as those at the centre of toilet rolls, and will run through them and chew them. They also like fruit tree branches to climb on and, if you put a flat rock in the tank, may use it as a lookout point.

### ***Company***

Gerbils naturally live in a group, so it is not fair to keep one on its own. If you buy two or more baby gerbils of the same sex – from the same litter or harmonious group they should get on well. However, adult gerbils (ie over ten weeks old) can be aggressive towards any newcomers to the group. Females are often more aggressive than males. If you have to introduce an older gerbil, split the tank with a wire frame so they can see, smell, but not injure each other, and swap sides so that the tank picks up the scent of both gerbils. After three or four days they should settle together without a barrier, but it is important to keep an eye on them to make sure they do not fight and injure one another.

### ***Getting to know you***

Gerbils are usually friendly and happy to be handled although some can be timid. Start by placing your hand in the tank so the gerbils can sniff and get used to you, then gently stroke them. Pick up a gerbil by placing your hand around its body, just behind the forelegs, and support the hindquarters in your other hand. Never handle a gerbil by the end of its tail as your animal can easily be injured. Children should only handle gerbils under adult supervision in case they inadvertently squeeze too hard.

### ***Gerbils as children's pets***

Gerbils are quick and agile and young children could find it quite difficult to hold them without squeezing too hard. Therefore, if you have young children and wish them to be able to handle

their pet, it may be better to choose a different species, see 'choosing the right small pet'. For older children, gerbils can make entertaining pets, but it is important that an adult is responsible for, and interested in, overseeing their care and well-being.

**Don't forget...**

- Female gerbils breed from the age of about three months and males from ten weeks, so it is best to keep pairs or small groups of the same sex.
- Gerbils should always have access to water – just providing fresh fruit and vegetables is not enough.
- Gerbils should have things to chew, such as an apple tree branch, or wooden toys.
- Gerbils are most active during the evening.