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Caring for your Hamster

Hamsters are the best known and one of the most popular of all the small rodents kept as pets. They live on average for two to three years.

The most common and largest type of hamster is the Syrian hamster, also known as the golden hamster. These are naturally solitary and will fight if you try to keep them in pairs or groups – breeders have to be careful to introduce mating pairs only when the female is in season. If you want a Syrian hamster, keep one only!

Dwarf (Russian, Roborovski and Chinese) hamsters are smaller than the Syrian. Dwarf breeds like company of their own kind, so keep a pair of the same sex and do not mix species. Ideally, your new hamster should be between four and eight weeks old when you get it.

Hamsters become sexually mature as young as four weeks, so make sure that males and females have been correctly sexed and separated – the breeder or pet shop staff should be able to show you the difference between the sexes. Do not try and keep different breeds of hamster together, they won't get on.

Home comforts

The ideal home for a Syrian hamster is a large wire cage with a plastic base no smaller than 60cm x 30cm floor space, by 30cm tall (higher if possible, as they do enjoy climbing on different levels). Wood should be avoided as it absorbs urine and quickly becomes smelly and unhygienic.

Russian, Roborovski and Chinese hamsters can squeeze through small places so are best kept in a tank or aquarium no smaller than 60cm x 30cm floor space, by 30cm tall. The tank needs a securely fitted wire lid to allow ventilation and prevent escape.

Dust-extracted shavings make good bedding for all types of hamsters, although some people prefer to use sawdust for long-coated types to prevent shavings getting tangled in their hair. Dwarf hamsters need beds deep enough to allow them to burrow. You should also provide shredded paper or dry peat as nesting material. Avoid fluffy bedding that could wrap round a hamster's limbs and impact in the stomach if eaten. Site your hamster's home away from draughts, sunlight and direct heat. Clean out the cage at least once a week.

Food for thought

A commercial hamster mix is a good basis for your pet's diet. Small pieces of fruit and vegetables, such as a slice of apple or a small sprig of cauliflower, will be appreciated. Hamsters hoard food in their beds, so do not give too many green vegetables as they will rot. Remove all uneaten food on a daily basis. Hamsters also store food in their cheek pouches (see Health matters).

A hamster's front teeth, like those of other rodents, grow continually, so they need to gnaw to keep them in shape. Dog biscuits make both good hamster treats and teeth trimmers. Fresh water must always be available from a free-access drinking bottle fastened to the cage. Check this daily to see that it has not become blocked and also to change the water.

Health matters

Storing food in cheek pouches can occasionally lead to problems. If your pet seems to have permanently stuffed cheeks, it could be because food has become impacted. Similarly, sharp pieces of food may occasionally pierce the pouches. If you suspect a problem, you should always call us, because if either of these has caused an infection, the hamster may need antibiotics.

The other common problem where we may get involved is wet tail, which is diarrhoea associated with stress, especially in newly weaned babies. Minimise the risk by preparing the cage before you bring the animal home, and leave your hamster undisturbed, except for feeding, for the first two or three days. Avoid handling your hamster if you have a cold or flu as it is possible to infect your animal.

It is useful to know that hamsters have scent glands on opposite sides of their flanks, which can look like small, dark patches. These are normal. Similarly, the testicles of male hamsters enlarge in the spring, so two large swellings at the bottom end of your hamster are usually nothing to worry about. However, if you are at all concerned about your hamster's health, give us a call.

Finally, it is worth remembering that hamsters are short sighted, especially those with pink eyes, so keep a close eye on yours if let out of the cage.

Exercise and entertainment

Hamsters are most active during the evening and at night so they are not ideally suited to being kept in a child's bedroom! They like cardboard tubes to chew and run through and, if you put up a wooden ledge, your hamster will enjoy climbing on it. Because of the risk of injury, many experts now advise against using hamster wheels with spokes. Solid, wide wheels are safer.

Hamster exercise balls should not be used as hamsters can quickly become exhausted with no means of escape.

Getting to know you

Hamsters rarely bite if they are used to being handled correctly from an early age. Never put your hand into your hamster's bed as the animal may be asleep and will be startled. If your hamster is nervous, check it is properly awake then hold your hand in the cage without trying to touch your hamster, so that your presence and smell becomes familiar. Soon your hamster will get to know you and become easier to handle.

Hamsters as children's pets

Hamsters are naturally nocturnal and can become alarmed, and may bite, if disturbed during the daytime. Children need to be supervised when handling hamsters and, as with all pets, an adult needs to be responsible for making sure the hamster is properly cared for.

Don't forget...

- Keep Syrian hamsters alone as adults will fight. Russian, Roborovski and Chinese hamsters should be kept in same-sex pairs or groups
- Hamsters enjoy fresh fruit and vegetables, but like to bury their food.
- Offer tiny portions to minimise the amount left to decompose and remove uneaten food daily
- Clean out the hamster house every week to maintain a healthy environment
- Hamsters do not make ideal children's pets unless there is adequate adult supervision