

Hamsters

Hamsters are cute little pets that don't require a lot of care. Watching a hamster stuff food into its cheek pouches is a lot of fun, as well as seeing a hamster climb through a series of tubes and run on its exercise wheel.

There are two types of hamsters commonly sold as pets, the better known species called the Syrian hamster, about 6-8" long, and the dwarf hamsters, never larger than 4" long. The Syrian hamster comes in many different colors and coat types, including the longhaired teddy bear hamster.

Young hamsters can be shy and need to be tamed, so they make good pets for adults and older children.

One hamster or more?

Hamsters are solitary animals and can only be kept one to a cage. Two hamsters of the same sex in the same cage will become territorial and tend to fight until the death of the other. A male and a female in a cage together will obviously have litters of babies but they will also fight at times.

Feeding

The basic hamster diet should be a fortified grain mix along with commercial rodent blocks. You can also give hamsters small amounts of veggies and other healthy foods. Treats are great for training and strengthening the bond between you and your hamsters and can comprise 10% of their diet. Yogurt drops are a good treat because they help bond with your pet, as well as prevent a fatal disease in small animals known as wet tail. (See health care for more info on wet tail.)

Housing

A hamster cage can be made of wire, plastic, or glass. It is probably best to choose a combination of wire and plastic for the best ventilation. Some hamsters have a tendency to chew on plastic, and all hamsters have a tendency to try to escape their cage, so make sure it is secure. For bedding you should use pet litter of recycled paper or organic pellets such as Carefresh. Do not use clay litter, pine or cedar shavings since the shavings cause respiratory infection. Some hamsters will use a special hamster litter box.

Accessories

Hamsters need a water bottle and a small food dish. For their bed choose from plastic, wood, or grass houses and/or a hammock or sleeping bag. They need an exercise wheel, and also enjoy tubes, climbing toys such as ladders, ropes, and branches, and chew toys.

Sanitation

Clean the cage and accessories weekly. Be sure to remove all stored food and scrub all parts of the water bottle and replace the bottle every six months.

Health care

With proper care and diet, hamsters tend to be healthy animals. Bad smelling diarrhea or wetness under the tail are usually signs of a serious problem called wet tail. The fur

around the anus will also start to turn green. Wet tail can be prevented by feeding your hamster yogurt drops or treated with a solution called Dri-Tail. Veterinary Pet Insurance (www.petinsurance.com) now offers health insurance policies for hamsters.

Special needs

Hamsters need more time than most small pets to socialize to people. Syrian hamsters are very nocturnal and do not like to be disturbed during the day. Very cold temperatures can cause a hamster to hibernate, which can cause it to appear dead.

Life cycle

Syrian hamsters live an average of 2-3 years, although it's possible for them to live 5 years. Hamsters can breed as early as 3 weeks of age but should not until 4 months. The gestation period is 12-15 days and the average litter size is 6-8, although some hamsters can have litters with up to 15 babies. Baby hamsters open their eyes at 18 days and can be weaned at 5 weeks.

Dwarf hamsters live an average of 2 years, although it's possible for them to live 3 years. They can breed as early as 4-5 weeks of age but should not until 3 months. The gestation period is 18-21 days and the average litter size is 5-6. The babies open their eyes at 12 days and can be weaned at 4-5 weeks.

Expert Help

If you have questions about your hamster, do not hesitate to contact us. We will be happy to help you choose a hamster care book for more complete information.

Supplies Checklist

Cage	Treats (Yogurt drops, etc)
Bedding and/or litter	Litter box (optional)
Water bottle	Bed
Food dish	Exercise wheel
Premium hamster food	Activity toys
	Chew toys

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