

General Practice Service
Willows Information Sheets

Looking after your hamster





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General

Hamsters are rodents with continuously growing incisor teeth. They have expandable cheek pouches for storing food and the name 'hamster' comes from the German word 'hanstern' meaning to hoard. Well kept hamsters can live for 2 to 3 years. They have poor eyesight but good hearing and a keen sense of smell. In the wild, hamsters inhabit arid parts of the world where they live in underground burrows and have strong nest building instincts. They are nocturnal, sleeping underground during the hot day and foraging for food during the cooler night. Hamsters are used to large open spaces and amazingly, they can travel up to 11 to 21 kilometres at night!

There are many different species of hamster. Syrian hamsters are most commonly kept as pets and are also known as golden hamsters, due to their original wild golden colour. They are found in a variety of different coat colours and lengths and are the largest hamster. They are solitary, territorial creatures and cannot be kept with other hamsters as they will fight, and can cause serious harm or even death.

Dwarf hamsters such as the Winter White Russian or Campbell's are more sociable and can be kept in pairs or small groups of the same sex, age and species. Any introductions need to be made when the hamsters are young (before about 10 weeks) and very gradually to prevent fighting. Due to their size, dwarf hamsters are harder to handle and more likely to nip and do not make the ideal first pet hamster. They should be kept by more experienced hamster keepers.

Housing

Hamsters are escape artists, so any housing must be secure. Dwarf hamsters are particularly good at squeezing through small spaces and cannot be kept in wire cages. They should be kept in a plastic/glass tank or aquarium with a securely fitted wire lid to provide ventilation. Syrian hamsters can be housed in a wire cage with a plastic base or a plastic/glass tank or aquarium.

When hamsters are restricted to cages or tanks, it is important to remember how active hamsters are in the wild and how far they travel when they are foraging for food. The more space that you can provide for your hamster, the better. Cages or tanks must be at least 60cm long by 30cm wide and 30cm high.

The cage or tank should be placed in a warm, well ventilated room away from drafts and direct sunlight or heat. If hamsters get too cold, they can go into a deep sleep (hibernate). They have sensitive hearing and need to be kept away from constant noise e.g. the hum of a fridge freezer or loud noise e.g. TVs or music systems. Being nocturnal, hamsters are most active at night so it is not a good idea to keep them in a child's bedroom where they are likely to keep the child awake.

As hamsters like to burrow, a deep bed of dust extracted shavings is ideal for the main bed. Shavings sometimes get caught in the coat of long haired hamsters so dust-extracted sawdust is better. A separate nesting area should be provided in a cardboard or plastic box where the hamster can burrow out of sight to sleep and hoard food. The ideal bedding for nesting is shredded clean white paper (e.g. kitchen paper) and soft hay. Avoid fluffy bedding such as cotton wool as it can wrap around limbs or cause impactions in the stomach if swallowed.

Soiled areas of bedding should be cleaned out daily and the nesting area should be checked for rotten food. The whole cage/tank should be completely cleaned out weekly. Hamsters can be litter-trained to make daily cleaning easier – use a shallow ceramic bowl or dish and place in it a small quantity of wood shavings which are wet with urine. If this is done daily, the hamster will gradually learn to use this area to go to the toilet.

Exercise

It is essential that hamsters get plenty of exercise in order to relieve boredom and to keep them fit and healthy. Use your imagination to make their cage/tank more interesting. Hamsters like to climb so it is a good idea to provide different levels. They like gnawing, running through and hiding in cardboard tubing. They like to climb on and hide in plastic yoghurt pots or flower pots. Some tanks come with plastic tubing for hamsters to run through but be careful as some of the bigger Syrian hamsters may get stuck.

Hamster wheels should be solid and wide. Wheels with spokes can trap limbs and cause injury. The wheel should be big enough that the hamsters back doesn't bend. Only leave wheels in cages for 3 to 4 hours at a time to prevent exhaustion. Hamster exercise balls without any means of escape can cause exhaustion, and the hamster should never be left unsupervised.

Feeding

Fresh water must be provided daily from a drip feed bottle with a metal spout. Feed good quality hamster mix along with small pieces of fresh fruit and vegetables. Only give small amounts of food at a time, as hamsters will hoard excess food in their bed where it can go rotten. Uneaten food should be removed daily and fresh food should be provided.

Gnawing is important to wear down incisor teeth. Nuts in their shells, such as monkey nuts and unsalted pistachio nuts, are good for gnawing, as are dog biscuits (based on egg and oatmeal without meat derivatives). Hamsters also like to gnaw carrots and hard baked bread crusts.

Foraging behaviour can be encouraged by hiding food in cardboard tubes and under pots.

Handling

Hamsters can be difficult to handle and do not make good pets for young children under 8 years old. Hamsters can inflict nasty bites and children should always have adult supervision when handling hamsters, as the risk of injury not only to the child but also to the hamster is high.

It is important to remember that in the wild, hamsters are prey animals therefore a lot of the biting behaviour that they are notorious for is self defence and caused by the fear of becoming the next meal of a larger predator.

Handling tips for ensuring the safety of you and your hamster include:

- Do not handle your new hamster for the first 2 to 3 days. It will be very scared and easily stressed.
- **Never try to handle a sleeping hamster** and do not put your hand into the sleeping compartment. They are very likely to bite if disturbed during the day so wait until the evening when they are awake and active. Just imagine how you feel or react when disturbed from a deep sleep!
- Talk quietly and gently to your hamster so that it gets to know the sound of your voice (remember that their hearing is better than their eyesight).

- Try to handle your hamster daily to allow it to get used to you. It may take several days before you are actually able to pick it up.
- When taking your hamster out of its cage or tank, take the whole lid off rather than using a hatch so that you have plenty of room to manoeuvre.
- Hold your hand as a closed fist in the cage to allow your hamster to get used to your presence and to allow your scent to become familiar. Allow the hamster to approach and sniff your hand. Once it appears confident and interested, open your hand and some hamsters will actually step on to your open palm.
- Use two hands to gently scoop your hamster up. Do not scruff or squeeze your hamster. Small children do not realise how hard they are squeezing and can easily hurt a small hamster.
- Hold the hamster over a low flat surface and do not drop it. If dropped more than 20cm, it can be seriously injured.
- If your hamster bites you and is holding on to your finger, be brave and gently lower the hamster on to a flat surface where it will let go. Do not try to pull it off (it will bite harder) and do not flick it off (it will be seriously hurt).

Health matters

It is important to check your hamster daily for signs of good health. In the evening, hamsters should be alert, bright, active and interested in food. There should be no discharge from their eyes, ears or mouth or

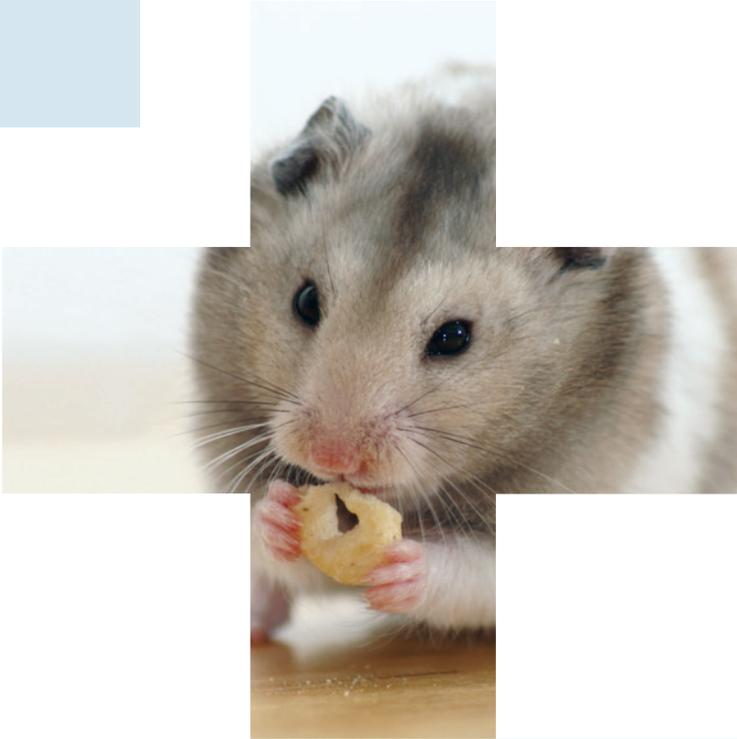
under their tails. They should have quiet, regular breathing. Their coats should be glossy with no bald patches or sores although hamsters have scent glands on their flanks so these areas may be darker with a little hair loss. There should be no lumps or bumps and their nails and teeth shouldn't be overgrown.

Common health problems in hamsters include:

- Impacted cheek pouches
- Overgrown nails and incisor teeth
- Wet tail (diarrhoea)
- Sore eyes
- Mites and ringworm
- Respiratory infections
- Diabetes
- Urinary tract infections
- Infected womb
- Damaged limbs or back from falling or getting caught in housing

If you have any concerns about your hamster, then please [contact us](#) for advice.

General Practice Service
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