

# Caring for Hamsters

- Before you commit to purchasing a hamster, ask the seller if you may have a veterinarian check it first.
- The Syrian hamster (also known as the *golden hamster*) is the species of hamster most commonly found in pet stores.
- Certain hamster breeds may be prohibited or require a special owner permit in some states.
- Hamsters should be housed individually because they can become aggressive toward each other, even if they are raised together.
- Hamsters have delicate bones that can break easily due to mishandling or falls.
- Have a veterinarian examine your hamster within 48 hours after you obtain it.

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Hamsters are the most common pet rodent for several reasons. These curious, attractive, and clean little companions are interesting to observe. Hamsters can be a good first pet for children, are easy to care for, and are usually friendly. However, hamsters are nocturnal (most active at night) and have delicate bones that can break easily due to mishandling or falls.

Before you commit to purchasing a hamster, ask the seller if you may have a veterinarian check it first. If the seller won't permit this, ask if you may return the hamster for a full refund if a veterinarian determines that it is unhealthy. Responsible sellers agree to veterinary examinations.

There are several hamster species, including the following:

- **Syrian** (weight: 3 to 4 oz [90 to 120 g]; life span: 18 to 24 months)
- **Chinese** (weight: 1.5 to 2 oz [40 to 60 g]; life span: 30 to 36 months)
- **Russian dwarf** (weight: 1 to 1.5 oz [35 to 50 g]; life span: 18 to 24 months)

The Syrian hamster (also known as the *golden hamster*) is the species of hamster most commonly found in pet stores. Descriptive nicknames for

Syrian hamster varieties include *teddy bear*, *panda bear*, and *black bear*.

Certain hamster breeds may be prohibited or require a special owner permit in some states. Check with your state's animal regulatory agency before buying a hamster other than a Syrian hamster.

## Physical Characteristics

Hamsters have paired scent glands that they use in mating and for marking territory. The glands appear as dark spots within the haircoat and are more obvious in males than in females. In Syrian hamsters, the glands are near the hips; in Russian dwarf and Chinese hamsters, the glands are on the belly.

Hamsters have expandable cheek pouches that they use to transport food and nesting material to their burrows. If threatened, a mother hamster may even gather her newborn babies into her cheek pouches for safety.

Hamsters have four front teeth that grow throughout life. These teeth require constant wear from gnawing, or they become too long and make eating difficult. The back teeth do not grow or require wear.

## Behavior

Hamsters should be housed individually because they can become aggressive toward each other, even if they are raised together.

Hamsters are usually gentle with people but may bite when afraid. The best way to prevent a bite is to avoid grabbing a hamster. Instead, a hamster should be coaxed into your hand or into a cup from which he or she can be "poured" onto your hand. Daily handling can help keep a hamster accustomed to people.

Hamsters are nocturnal (most active at night) and don't like to be disturbed while sleeping. Never try to pick up a sleeping hamster because it may nip if suddenly awakened.

Hamsters hoard food. The name *hamster* comes from the German word for *hoarder*.

## Caring for Your New Pet

### Reproduction

Hamsters reproduce quickly and can become aggressive toward each other, so breeding is best left to experienced breeders. Sexual maturity occurs at 5 to 7 weeks of age, pregnancy lasts 16 to 22 days, and litter size is six to eight pups (but 20 or more is possible). A mother may abandon or eat her pups if she feels threatened.

### Diet

Commercially available food for rats or mice can provide proper nutrition for hamsters if the food contains 15% to 20% protein. Commercially available food for rabbits can also be fed. Pelleted foods, which require gnawing, are good for hamsters' teeth. Dog or monkey biscuits can be provided to encourage tooth wear. The diet can be supplemented with small amounts (less than 10% of the total diet) of hay, vegetables, and fruits. Sugary treats shouldn't be fed.

Provide fresh water at all times, change it daily, and check that the water bottle is functioning properly.

### Environment

A hamster's enclosure should be as large as possible. The enclosure must be escape-proof to prevent injury to the hamster or destruction of property. Hamsters seem to prefer enclosures with solid floors and abundant nesting material. Wild hamsters live in underground burrows, so provide your hamster with 2 inches (5 cm) or more of bedding to permit burrowing. Use recycled paper bedding or aspen bedding. Don't use pine or cedar bedding because it contains strong-smelling oils that can be irritating or harmful. Toilet tissue can be provided for nesting.

The enclosure must be well ventilated and kept clean. Hamsters usually eliminate in one corner of their enclosure, which helps keep it clean.

The environmental temperature should be kept between 64°F and 79°F (17°C and 26°C). Direct sunlight, drafts, and rapid temperature changes should be avoided. If chilled, hamsters may go into hibernation.

Provide rodent chew toys to encourage tooth wear.

### Exercise

Hamsters require exercise to stay healthy and happy. In the enclosure, provide a large exercise wheel with

a solid running surface. Exercise balls, into which a hamster can be placed, should be well-ventilated and large enough for the hamster. Hamsters should be supervised while in an exercise ball or out of their enclosure. They should be returned to their enclosure for food and water after a short period of exercise. Providing climbing tubes can also encourage hamsters to exercise.

### Preventive Care

Have a veterinarian examine your hamster within 48 hours after you obtain it. This establishes a basic medical record that your veterinarian can use to help keep your hamster healthy. Most small animal veterinarians will treat hamsters. You may want to consult a veterinarian with experience in treating exotic companion mammals. Take your hamster to your veterinarian every 6 to 12 months for a physical examination, including annual fecal and oral examinations.

In addition, do the following to keep your hamster safe and healthy:

- Keep your hamster's enclosure clean.
- Ensure that your hamster can't escape from the enclosure.
- Handle your hamster carefully.
- Don't put your hamster on furniture from which it can fall and become injured.
- Closely watch your hamster when it isn't in its enclosure.

### Signs That a Hamster Is Sick

If your hamster has any of the following problems, see your veterinarian as soon as possible.

- Loss of appetite or weight
- Lethargy (tiredness)
- A hunched posture
- An abnormal walk
- Discharge from the eyes, ears, or nose
- Hair loss or a scruffy haircoat
- Difficulty breathing
- Diarrhea ("wet tail")