GERBIL CARE GUIDE

Housing

CAGE

SIZE: 1-2 cubic feet minimum for a single or pair of gerbils.

MATERIAL: Aquarium tanks and tub/bin cages are ideal as they provide the size, security and depth needed for gerbils to thrive. Glass aquariums are optimal vs any cage with plastic due to gerbils' tendency to chew through plastic which would provide a means of escape. Gerbils do best in deep cages with layers of bedding and tunnels to explore and nest in. Habitrails are not recommended. One Habitrail is way too small for gerbils and many connected are very difficult to clean, plus a gerbil could chew through the plastic.

BEDDING

GOOD
- CareFresh
- shredded paper
- Yesterday's News (paper pellets)
- paper towels
- fleece

BAD
- cedar
- pine
- corn cob
- saw dust
- clay cat litter

BEDDING TIP: Use paper pellets to line the bottom of the cage then add high layers of shredded paper or CareFresh for nesting/burrowing. MN Pocket Pet Rescue recommends avoiding all wood bedding to avoid respiratory illness.

FURNISHINGS

Decking out your gerbil's cage with not only the essentials but also an assortment of fun stuff to do is incredibly important for the happiness and well-being of your pet. It is ideal to change out the toys and furnishings for them in addition to providing a variety and number of items. The cage should be full of fun stuff to do, places to climb and burrow, things to chew, tunnels and tubes, hides, etc.

ESSENTIALS
- water bottle
- food dish
- shelter (box, igloo, etc)
- chew toy (wood, lava)
- nesting material for burrowing and tunnel making
- wheel
- dust house and bath

FUN STUFF
- tunnels
- bird toys
- treat balls
- paper
- bits of fabric
- ladders
- cardboard
- old socks
- paper towel rolls

Why chew toys? Gerbils are rodents which means their teeth constantly grow. They require chew toys to gnaw on in order to keep their teeth trim.
DIET

AMOUNT: Always keep your gerbil’s bowl full.

BRANDS/TYPE: High quality hamster/gerbil kibble, pellets or blocks are considered the best choices for staple diets. Commercial foods with seeds and other mix ins can be problematic as many gerbils will pick and choose which parts they want to eat and don’t get a balanced diet.

TREATS

GOOD

- apples
- blueberries
- bananas
- green beans
- broccoli
- carrots
- celery
- cucumber
- pumpkin
- zucchini
- strawberries
- peas
- cheerios
- rice krispies
- plain popcorn
- cooked unseasoned egg
- timothy hay
- alfalfa
- parsnip
- mint
- sweet potato
- unsalted cashews
- cooked unseasoned chicken/turkey
- cooked unseasoned fish
- cooked unseasoned tofu
- unsalted pine nuts
- mealworms
- crickets
- unsalted crackers

BAD

- any fruit seeds
- raw kidney beans
- eggplant
- garlic
- onion
- any citrus fruit
- rhubarb
- fizzy drinks
- raw meat
- spicy foods
- dairy
- raw potatoes
- candy
- caffeine

Example

MN Pocket Pet Rescue recommends Oxbow brand gerbil kibble:

OVERWEIGHT GERBILS: When giving your gerbils treats, keep their size in mind. Never give more than 1/4 tablespoon or so. Gerbils can become easily obese if given too many treats, fed an improper diet (mainly seed mixes) and/or do not get sufficient exercise via a wheel, exercise ball or floor time. Keep an eye on your gerbil’s physique and if you notice he is getting a bit chubby, change his lifestyle accordingly.
GERBIL CARE GUIDE

Exercise & Social Needs

EXERCISE

WHEELS: Most gerbils love to run on wheels! This is a great way for them to exercise and keep entertained. Fine mesh wire wheels are ideal as gerbils may chew plastic wheels. If you use a plastic wheel be sure it is solid based and you monitor for signs of chewing. Never use metal bar wheels as tails and limbs can get caught and be damaged.

EXERCISE BALLS: Letting your gerbil run in an exercise ball is a fun way for your pet to safely explore your house. Be sure to always closely monitor your gerbils when they are in their exercise balls to ensure they don't get stuck or escape.

FLOOR TIME: Take your gerbil out in an area where you can easily catch it such as on your bed or a chair. Let it run around in your hands, lap and arms. Once it is comfortable with you, you can let them run around and play your designate gerbil proof area. Never grab a gerbil by the tail! As a defense mechanism gerbils can shed the skin or even their entire tails in order to get away.

SOCIAL NEEDS

BONDED BUDDIES: Gerbils are very social creatures and will be happiest when living with other gerbils. It is strongly recommended to keep a minimum of two chin-chillas at a time. Never keep unaltered opposite sex pairs together.

Gerbils are nocturnal so spending time with them in the evenings will be the most rewarding. Keep this in mind when placing your pet's cage as most gerbils may run on their wheels much of the night.

KEY COMPONENTS OF TRAINING
- trust
- positive reinforcement
- consistency
- repetition
- patience

TEACHING YOUR GERBIL TO TRUST YOU

Every time you approach your gerbil's habitat, bring a small treat for your pet. They will learn to associate you with pleasant things and look forward to your visits. Never feed treats through cage bars and always offer with a flat palm or your pet may start to nip fingers.

Never grab a sleeping gerbil. Always announce yourself by calling its name, rattling the water bottle or gently tapping the cage. Once your pet is awake, hold your hand out flat for it to come to you.

A great way to bond with your gerbil is letting it out of its cage to run, play and spend time with you. The more you let them out to play, the sooner they will be comfortable with you.

Speak softly to your gerbil so it will get used to your voice.

Coax your gerbil to climb into your hand with a treat rather than forcefully picking it up.

LEARN HOW TO TRAIN YOUR GERBIL
http://molly.kalafut.org/animals/gerbils-training.html
GENERAL INFO

**ANNUAL EXAM** : It is important to take your gerbil to the vet for an annual exam to ensure your pet is in good health. Gerbils do not require vaccines.

**GENERAL SIGNS OF ILLNESS**
- any behavioral change
- lethargy
- defensive aggression
- disinterested in treats
- changes in eating or drinking
- disinterested in interacting with you
- poor coat quality
- half closed, dull eyes

**LIFESPAN** : 3 - 4 years

**REPRODUCTION** : Gerbils become sexually mature and are able to reproduce starting at ages 8 - 12 weeks.

COMMON ISSUES

**UPPER RESPIRATORY INFECTION**

It is very important to watch for any signs of illness and get your gerbil to the vet right away as they will try to hide illness for as long as they possibly can, meaning by the time you notice any symptoms, they have been ill for a while and will likely need treatment as soon as possible. Signs of URI include red around the nose, sneezing, labored breathing, chattering, sniffing, eye or nose discharge, lethargy, weight loss and lack of appetite.

**DEGLOVED OR DETACHED TAIL**

*Never grab a gerbil by the tail!* As a defense mechanism gerbils can shed the skin (degloving) or even their entire tails (detached) in order to get away.

**EAR INFECTION**

If you notice your gerbil is walking in circles, has a head tilt or loss of balance, it may have an ear infection and will need to see a vet for medication.

**SEIZURES**

When a gerbil is frightened or overstimulated it may have a seizure. Signs include going limp, freezing and twitching. This is generally not life threatening.

**DIARRHEA**

Diarrhea is often caused by too many treats. However, diarrhea is one of the main symptoms of the highly contagious and deadly bacterial infection called Tyzzer’s disease. The bacteria that causes this illness, Clostridium piliforme, is spread when gerbils ingest contaminated food or water supplies. Tyzzer’s disease must be treated by a veterinarian. Other symptoms include hunched posture, loss of appetite, rough coat, dehydration and abdominal pain.
**VOCALIZATION**

**SQUEAKING**: When disturbed, surprised or picked up, some gerbils will squeak. This is usually a protest to what is happening or a cry in pain. Some gerbils will also squeak when playing or fighting.

**VIBRATING**: This means your gerbil is content and happy - he is purring!

**THUMPING**: This means it is a warning sound that gerbils make by stomping their hind feet.

**BODY LANGUAGE**

**BITING**: Gerbils are small, prey animals and some of them use biting as their line of defense. Some gerbils will also bite fingers if they think they are food or they smell food. Always allow your pet to come to you before picking it up, always wash your hands before handling it and work on trust training your gerbil in order to prevent bites.

**BURROWING**: Gerbils love to build nests, burrows and tunnels. Provide them with lots of nesting material for them to explore in.

**SCENT MARKING**: Gerbils have scent glands on their abdomens that are used by rubbing their bellies on items to mark their territory.

**STANDING ON HIND LEGS**: If a gerbil is concerned and on the alert it will stand with its front paws together. If taking an exploratory stance to better investigate something it will hold its paws more relaxed. Context should be able to help tell you your gerbil’s intended meaning.

**ROLLING ONTO BACK**: This is a trusting, submissive move that gerbils display to each other, often as a request to be groomed.

**GROOMING**: Gerbils tend to groom themselves when they are feeling relaxed and content. It is also a way to socialize with other gerbils.

**LICKING THE WALLS**: If you notice your gerbil licking the walls of its habitat or water battle, be sure that the water bottle is full of water and is functioning properly as this is a sign of thirst.
SAFE HANDLING

TRUST: It is best to let your gerbil come to you before reaching in to pick it up as this develops trust. Talk to your gerbil and let it sniff your hand before you pick it up to announce that you are coming. A great way to earn your gerbil’s trust is to place a treat in the palm of your hand and just rest your hand flat, palm up on the floor of cage without moving. Leave it there for as long as you are able. Eventually, your gerbil will be curious and comfortable enough to come up and sniff you, then climb into your hand to take the treat. In time you will be able to place your hand in there and have your pet come up to you without a treat. Once your gerbil is totally comfortable being in your hand you can take him out of the cage and play with him.

GROOMING

BATHING: Gerbils are fastidiously clean animals and spend a large part of their time grooming themselves. You should never bathe your gerbil.

DENTAL CARE: You do not need to brush your gerbil’s teeth but you must provide plenty of chew toys so your mouse can wear down its teeth naturally. Check your gerbil’s teeth regularly to be sure they are not overgrown or misaligned.

NAILS: Generally, gerbils do not need their nails trimmed and will wear down their claws naturally, especially if you provide your pet with a brick or something similar to run on. It is not recommended that you cut your gerbil’s nails as their toes are very tiny and the risk of cutting off a toe is high.

DUST BATH: Gerbils enjoy rolling around in dust baths which help keep their fur clean and to control oil. Use only dust made for small animals and never play sand. Place a small amount of dust in a gerbil dust bath house or a small dish and allow your pet to roll around. Remove from the cage once your gerbil is finished or he may use it as a toilet! Change the dust if it gets coarse or dirty.