Hamster Care Guide

Housing

Cage

**SIZE**: 1-2 cubic feet minimum for a single dwarf hamster, adding 0.5 cubic feet per additional dwarf hamster. The larger Syrian hamsters require at least 2 cubic feet for a single hamster.

**MATERIAL**: Aquarium tanks and tub/bin cages are ideal as they provide the size, security and depth needed for hamsters to thrive. Hamsters do best in deep cages with layers of bedding and tunnels to explore and nest in. Syrian hamsters can be kept in rat cages with levels and deep pans with bar spacing of at least 1/4". Be sure to put the levels close together and/or have hammocks to prevent hamsters from falling very far if they do fall. Hamsters are not as agile as most rodents. Habitrails are not recommended. One Habitrail is way too small for hamsters and many connected are very difficult to clean.

Example
The cage on the top is a wire rat cage. The middle is a tub/bin cage. This is a cheaper option but requires a bit of DIY. And last is an aquarium tank. Remember, the more room the better!

Learn how to make a tub/bin cage!
https://hammyhappenings.wordpress.com/diy-hamster-cage-bin-cage/

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 hamster 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 hammy. 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

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

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

DIET

**AMOUNT:** Always keep your hamster'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 hamsters will pick and choose which parts they want to eat and don’t get a balanced diet.**

Example

MN Pocket Pet Rescue recommends Oxbow brand hamster kibble:

![Healthy Handfuls Hamster & Gerbil Food](image)

TREATS

**GOOD**

- apples
- bananas
- bean sprouts
- bell peppers
- blueberries
- broccoli
- carrots
- cauliflower
- clover
- Cheerios
- cranberries
- cucumbers
- dog biscuits
- hard boiled eggs
- scrambled eggs (plain)
- cooked green beans
- mealworms
- nuts (no almonds)
- oatmeal
- parsley
- cooked pasta
- peas
- plain popcorn
- raspberries
- romaine lettuce
- cooked brown rice
- sunflower seeds
- whole grain toast
- yogurt

**BAD**

- apple seeds
- almonds
- raw kidney beans
- eggplant
- garlic
- onion
- any citrus fruit
- rhubarb
- fizzy drinks
- raw meat
- spicy foods
- watermelon
- raw potatoes
- candy

**OVERWEIGHT HAMSTERS:**

When giving your hamsters treats, keep their size in mind. Never give more than 1/4 tablespoon or so. Hamsters 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 hamster's physique and if you notice he is getting a bit chubby, change his lifestyle accordingly.
**EXERCISE**

**WHEELS**: Most hamsters love to run on wheels! This is a great way for them to exercise and keep entertained. Be sure to only use wheels with a solid base (never wire) and of the appropriate size.

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

**FLOOR TIME**: Take your hamster 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 hamster proof area.

Hamsters 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 hamsters will run on their wheels most of the night.

**SOCIAL NEEDS**

**BONDED BUDDIES**: Unlike most pocket pets, hamsters are solitary creatures and will fight if housed together. Some dwarf hamsters can live together in pairs or groups, but it is not common or necessary unless they are already bonded.

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

**LEARN HOW TO TRAIN YOUR HAMSTER**
http://hamsteragility.com/?id=355

**TEACHING YOUR HAMSTER TO TRUST YOU**

Every time you approach your hamster'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 hamster. 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 hamster 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 hamster so it will get used to your voice.

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

ANNUAL EXAM: It is important to take your hamster to the vet for an annual exam to ensure your pet is in good health. Hamsters 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

LIFESPAN: 2 - 3 years

SPECIES: There are two main types of hamsters: Syrian hamsters (6-7” long) and dwarf hamsters (3-5” long.) There are several different species of dwarf hamsters including Campbell’s, Roborovskis, Winter Whites and Chinese.

COMMON ISSUES

UPPER RESPIRATORY INFECTION

It is very important to watch for any signs of illness and get your hamster 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 sneezing, labored breathing, chattering, sniffing, eye or nose discharge, lethargy, weight loss and lack of appetite.

WET TAIL

One of the most common and well know hamster illness is wet tail. This thought to be caused by an overgrowth by a certain bacteria and your pet can become susceptible when it is stressed, particularly when moving to a new environment. Symptoms include diarrhea, a wet tail/hind end, lethargy, foul odor, hunching and aggression. If you believe your hamster has wet tail, bring it to the vet immediately as this illness is life threatening and your pet will need antibiotics and possibly fluids. Not all diarrhea is caused by wet tail, sometimes it can be caused by a change in diet or from foods with high water content.

REPRODUCTION: Hamsters become sexually mature and are able to reproduce from 3-6 weeks of age.

SYRIAN HAMSTER

DWARF HAMSTER

RESCUE MINNESOTA POCKET PET

HIBERNATION

Hamsters can go into hibernation if the temperature drops below 60 degrees F which is very dangerous for your pet. Try to maintain a temperature of between 65 and 75 degrees F. If you notice that your hamster is not moving, feels cold and limp and is breathing shallowly, he may be beginning to hibernate. Many people initially think that their hibernating hamster is actually dead. You must warm him up by placing him under a heat lamp or on a heating pad or hot water bottle. You will also need to work on waking him up by rubbing him. Once he is awake, offer water with a dropper as you need to help your pet rehydrate.
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Behavior

**VOCALIZATION**

**SQUEAKING**: When disturbed, surprised or picked up, some hamsters will squeak. This is usually a protest to what is happening or a cry in pain.

**TEETH CHATTERING/GRINDING**: This means your hamster is irritated or afraid. It’s next step is to bite so leave it alone.

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**BODY LANGUAGE**

**BITING**: Hamsters are small, prey animals and many of them use biting as their line of defense. Some hamsters will 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 hamster in order to prevent bites.

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

**STASHING FOOD IN CHEEKS**: Hamsters often shove food in their large cheek pouches to transport it to their burrows and nests for safe keeping.

**STANDING ON HIND LEGS**: This can be an aggressive stance to warn you to back off or an exploratory stance to better investigate something. Context should be able to tell you your hamster’s intended meaning.

**FREEZING**: When startled or frightened, sometimes hamsters will freeze in place or roll over and freeze.

**ROLLING ONTO BACK**: This is a submissive, fearful move.

**GROOMING**: Hamsters tend to groom themselves when they are feeling relaxed and content.

**STRETCHING**: Stretching occurs when a hamster is content and of course after just waking up.

**YAWNING**: This can indicate that your hamster is nervous or simply tired.

**REPETITIVE BEHAVIORS**: If you notice your hamster engaging in repetitive behaviors such as pacing, running in circles or flipping/falling backward he may have a neurological disorder, ear infection or stroke. Another cause for these behaviors is inadequate housing and enrichment which can cause boredom and therefore obsessive, repetitive behaviors.
**SAFE HANDLING**

**TRUST**: It is best to let your hamster come to you before reaching in to pick it up as this develops trust. Talk to your hamster and let it sniff your hand before you pick it up to announce that you are coming. Hamsters have very poor eyesight and this will help prevent startling them. A great way to earn your hamster’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 hammy 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 hamster is totally comfortable being in your hand you can take him out of the cage and play with him.

**GROOMING**

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

**BRUSHING**: Long-haired Syrian hamsters may occasionally need to be brushed. Use a soft bristled brush or a toothbrush.

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

**NAILS**: Generally, hamsters 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 hamster’s nails as their toes are very tiny and the risk of cutting of a toe is high.

**DUST BATH**: Dwarf hamsters often 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 hamster dust bath house or a small dish and allow your hamster to roll around. Remove from the cage once your hamster is finished or he may use it as a toilet! Change the dust if it gets coarse or dirty.

**PICKING UP YOUR HAMSTER**: It is ideal that you train your hamster to hop in your hand (described on the left) then pick it up. Until then, you can gently scoop them from underneath or, for particularly timid hamsters, use a box or exercise ball for them to run into. Once your hammy is comfortable being picked up and handled, you can let it run around you.