

Hamsters

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Hamsters are frisky, playful and fun to watch. Since they're nocturnal, though, they sleep all day and play at night.

Home Sweet Home

Your hamster needs a cage that's at least 24 inches long by 14 inches wide by 12 inches high. A cage with a high plastic bottom to keep the litter in, and horizontal metal bars for climbing, works best. Cage bars should be no wider than one-half inch to prevent your hamster from escaping. Hamsters are burrowing animals by nature and prefer a solid floor covered with shredded newspaper or commercial nesting materials. An aquarium can be modified for your hamster, but be aware that glass sides restrict the airflow and keep heat in, which could be detrimental to your hamster's health.

Be sure to place the cage out of drafts and direct sunlight. Hamsters will hibernate if they get too cold. Make sure your cage closes securely or your aquarium has a tight-fitting screen cover. Provide a box for sleeping and plenty of nesting materials, like unscented tissues.

Chow Time

Commercial hamster food will provide your hamster with a balanced diet and is available at pet supply stores. You can supplement your hamster's diet with fresh foods like sunflower seeds, nuts, dark green lettuce, most vegetables, most fruits, raisins, rolled oats, cottage cheese and yogurt. Introduce new foods slowly and in small amounts to reduce the risk of diarrhea. Use a sturdy crockery bowl that can't be tipped over and is easy to clean.

Provide your hamster with a piece of dog biscuit to chew on, as it contains protein and minerals and will help wear down your hamster's teeth. Keeping some hay in your hamster's cage will provide it with necessary roughage. Place it in a hayrack so it doesn't become contaminated with feces and urine. A salt lick is also recommended to prevent mineral deficiencies. Again, hang it from the side of the cage to prevent contamination. Keep fresh water available in a suspended "licker" water bottle at all times.

Health Matters

Hamsters live an average of two years. They're sexually mature at six to eight weeks.

For exercise, provide your hamster with a wheel and/or plastic ball to run around in. Be sure to supervise your hamster while it's in the exercise ball.

Handling with Care

When picking up your hamster, approach it slowly and be careful not to startle it. Curl one hand over its body, with your fingers and thumb around its abdomen. Hold it securely, but don't squeeze. To carry your

hamster, place the other hand under its legs. The more you handle your hamster, the friendlier and tamer it will be.

Behavior Bits

Hamsters are solitary animals. Trying to introduce a second hamster into a cage could result in serious injury. Occasionally, littermates that have never been separated can remain together, but you'll need to constantly monitor their interactions, and you'll want to make sure they're the same sex to prevent unwanted litters.

Hamsters have very keen hearing, but poor eyesight and rely heavily on their sense of smell. Because of their poor eyesight, be careful about placing them on any high surface unsupervised, as they may walk off the edge.

Resources

- National Hamster Council, www.hamsters-uk.org
- Fritzsche, Helga. Hamsters: A Complete Pet owner's Manual. Barron Book Series. New York.
- Stephens, Jay. A Beginner's Guide to Hamsters. T.F.H. Publications.