

All About Pets

The national pet care information service

CARING FOR YOUR GERBIL



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity

Gerbils are fascinating pets and will fit into most families.

They are inquisitive, rarely bite and can be found in many colours, from the natural brown and grey with light belly – called agouti – to golden, cream, black and blue. There are about 90 species of gerbils, but the Mongolian gerbil is the one that is kept as a pet. They are sometimes mistaken for mice or rats, but there are physical and behavioural differences. Gerbils have long, hairy tails and, as you will find out, are serious diggers!



Because gerbils originate from desert and dry grassland areas they produce little urine and waste, so it is fairly easy to keep their environment clean and free from smells. They are very sociable and should not be kept alone – but as they breed from three months old and can produce a litter of four to ten babies every 24 days, it is best to keep pairs or small groups of the same sex.

Only buy gerbils from a knowledgeable breeder or good pet shop. They should not be sold before they are five to six weeks old.

Home comforts

In the wild, gerbils live in underground tunnels up to three metres long, with several entries and chambers. The best way to mimic this, and therefore keep them happy, is to house them in a large tank or old aquarium with a wire lid and plenty of material for them to dig and tunnel into. Wire cages are unsuitable because the bedding will be kicked out.

A pair of gerbils needs a tank with a minimum floor surface of 40cms by 75cms. It needs to be at least 30cms high because they are such good jumpers. Place the cage away from cold draughts and direct sunlight or heat. As these little animals are active during the evening – and occasionally during the day as well – you might not want to keep their tank in a bedroom. You probably won't disturb them, but they may disturb you!

Gerbils need a thick layer of bedding material that they can dig into, such as dust-extracted wood shaving or peat moss (or a mixture of the two), plus shredded paper for nesting. Do not use fluffy bedding material as this can wrap around your gerbils' limbs and injure them. Your gerbils will also appreciate a nest box – but not wooden or plastic, which will be chewed. A clay flowerpot cut in half makes a good sleeping area. A dust bath of chinchilla sand should be provided.



Food for thought

Most gerbil owners like to feed commercial mixes as the basis of their pets' diet, but they should also be given fresh vegetables and fruit. Earthenware or stainless steel feed bowls should be used. Don't worry about them burying their feed bowl under their bedding, as it is natural for them to store and hoard it.

Gerbils enjoy apples, carrots, broccoli, sprouts and cauliflower. Lettuce can be given occasionally, but only in very small amounts. Do not feed potatoes, rhubarb or tomato leaves, as these are poisonous. Also ensure your gerbils have a constant supply of fresh water. This should be provided in a free access water bottle fixed inside the tank as water bowls will be tipped over and buried.

Health matters

A healthy gerbil has bright eyes, a glossy coat and is alert and lively – except in the daytime. A running or sticky nose or eyes, a dull coat and/or lethargy are signs of ill health and need veterinary advice. Like other rodents, gerbils have upper incisor teeth that carry on growing throughout their lives. They keep them at the right length by gnawing on things, so provide a small branch from a fruit tree, such as apple.

Exercise and entertainment

Gerbils live to dig and burrow, so make sure they have enough bedding to do this to their hearts' content. They will have enormous fun with cardboard tubes, such as those at the centre of toilet rolls, and will run through them and chew them. They also like fruit tree branches to climb on and if you put a flat rock in the tank, may use it as a 'lookout point.'

Company

Gerbils naturally live in a group, so it is not fair to keep one on its own. If you buy two or more baby gerbils of the same sex from the same litter or harmonious group, they should get on well. However, adult gerbils – any over ten weeks old – can be aggressive towards strangers. Females are often more aggressive than males. If you have to introduce an older gerbil, split the tank with a wire frame so that they can see, smell but not injure each other and swap sides so that the tank picks up the scent of both gerbils. After three or four days they should settle together without a barrier, but it is important to keep an eye on them to make sure.

Getting to know you

Gerbils are usually friendly and happy to be handled, although some can be timid. Start by placing your hand in the tank so the gerbils can sniff and get used to you, then gently stroke them. Pick up a gerbil by placing your hand around its body, just behind the front legs, and support the hindquarters in your other hand. Never handle a gerbil by the end of its tail. Children should only handle gerbils under adult supervision in case they inadvertently squeeze too hard.

Don't forget

- Gerbils will breed from the age of about three months, so it is best to keep pairs or small groups of the same sex
- Make sure your gerbils always have access to water – just providing fresh fruit and vegetables is not enough
- Supply your gerbils with things to chew, such as an apple tree branch
- Gerbils are most active during the evening

Further information

For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit www.allaboutpets.org.uk, the national pet care information service. Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

All About Pets is provided by The Blue Cross, Britain's pet charity. We rely entirely on your support to enable us to continue our vital work. Any contribution would be most welcome. Thank you.



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