

# All About Pets

*The national pet care information service*



## CARING FOR YOUR HAMSTER



THE BLUE CROSS

*Britain's pet charity*

*Hamsters are the best known and one of the most popular of all the small rodents kept as pets. They live on average for two to three years.*

The most common and largest type of hamster is the Syrian hamster, also known as the golden hamster. These hamsters are naturally solitary and will fight if you try to keep them in pairs or groups – breeders have to be careful to introduce mating pairs only when the female is in season. If you want a Syrian hamster, keep it on its own!



Russian or dwarf hamsters grow to about 8cms and Chinese hamsters are slightly longer at maturity. Both types like company of their own kind, so keep a pair of the same sex and do not mix species. Only keep a breeding pair if you have guaranteed good homes for the babies and remember that a pair may produce a litter every few weeks.



Ideally, your new hamster should be between four and eight weeks old and bought from a responsible breeder or good pet shop. The Blue Cross occasionally has hamsters available for rehoming.

## Home comforts

Hamster houses range from simple cages with plastic tray floors and clip-on wire tops to complicated stacking systems on several levels with plastic tunnels. You can also use an old aquarium, with a wire mesh lid to allow ventilation but prevent the hamster from escaping. A Syrian hamster will need a home with a minimum floor surface of 60cm x 30cm and 30cm high. Dwarf hamsters can squeeze through tiny spaces, so are best kept in tanks. Lids should have no gaps larger than 1cm.

Dust-extracted shavings make good bedding for all types of hamsters, though some people prefer to use sawdust for long-coated types to prevent shavings tangling in their hair. Dwarf hamsters need beds deep enough to allow them to burrow. You should also provide shredded paper or peat for nesting material. Avoid fluffy bedding that could wrap round a hamster's limbs and impact in the stomach if eaten. Site your hamster home out of draughts, sunlight and direct heat. Clean out the cage at least once a week.

## Food for thought

A commercial hamster mix is a good basis for your pet's diet. Small pieces of fruit and vegetables, such as a slice of apple or a small sprig of cauliflower, will be appreciated. Hamsters hoard food in their beds, so do not give too much green stuff, or it will rot. They also store food in their cheek pouches.

A hamster's front incisors, like those of other rodents, grow continually and they need to gnaw to keep them in shape. Dog biscuits make good hamster treats and teeth trimmers. Fresh water must always be available from a free-access drinking bottle fastened to the cage – check daily that this has not become blocked. Alternatively, water can be put in a small, heavy ceramic bowl.

## Health matters

Hamsters store food in their cheek pouches, which can occasionally lead to problems. If your pet seems to have permanently stuffed cheeks, it could be because food has become impacted. Always seek veterinary advice, because if it has set up an infection the hamster may need antibiotics. Similarly, sharp pieces of food may occasionally pierce the pouches.

The other common problem which needs veterinary help is Wet Tail, diarrhoea associated with stress, especially in newly weaned babies. Minimise the risk by preparing the cage before you bring your hamster home and leaving it undisturbed, except for feeding, for the first two or three days. Be careful handling your hamster if you have a cold, as it is possible for it to catch it.

It's useful to know that hamsters have scent glands on opposite sides of their flanks, which can look like small, dark patches. These are normal. Similarly, the testicles of male hamsters enlarge in the spring, so two large swellings at the bottom end of your hamster are probably nothing to worry about. However, if you are at all concerned about your hamster's health, do consult a vet.

Finally, it's worth remembering that hamsters are very short sighted, so keep a close eye on yours if you let it out of its cage.

## Exercise and entertainment

Hamsters are most active during the evening and at night. They like cardboard tubes to chew and run through and if you put up a wooden ledge, your hamster will enjoy climbing on it. Because of the risk of injuries, many experts now advise against using spoked 'hamster wheels.' Solid, wide wheels are safer. Hamster 'exercise balls' need careful supervision to avoid exhaustion.

## Company

One Syrian hamster is happy, but two or more means civil war and serious fighting – so keep members of this species alone. Russian (dwarf) and Chinese hamsters need company and can be kept in same sex pairs or small groups or breeding pairs. Don't breed indiscriminately and don't mix species.

## Getting to know you

Hamsters rarely bite if they are used to being handled correctly from an early age. Never put your hand into your hamster's bed as it may be asleep and you'll startle it. If your hamster is nervous, check it is properly awake and then hold your hand in the cage, without trying to touch it, so it can get used to your presence and smell. Soon it will get to know you and become easier to handle.

## Don't forget

- Keep Syrian hamsters alone as adults will fight. Dwarf (Russian) and Chinese hamsters should be kept in pairs or groups
- Hamsters enjoy fresh fruit and vegetables but bury their food, so offer tiny portions to minimise the amount left to decompose
- Clean out the hamster house every week to keep a healthy environment
- Hamsters do not make ideal children's pets unless there is adequate adult supervision

## Further information

For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit [www.allaboutpets.org.uk](http://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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