



# GERBILS

Gerbils are small, curious, friendly rodents originating from the desert of Mongolia and China. They are relatively easy to care for, and if handled frequently, make good pets. If this is your first gerbil, it is important to understand that they are *not* just small dogs or cats. They have unique requirements for their care that many new owners are not aware of. Your gerbil veterinarian will discuss how to properly care for your new pet and keep him or her healthy and happy!

## WHAT DO I FEED MY GERBIL?

Proper nutrition is one of the most important aspects of your gerbil's health. Many of the disease conditions we see in gerbils are due to improper diet. In the wild, gerbils eat a mixture of seeds, roots, leaves, stems, and bulbs. Pet gerbils should be fed a formulated *rodent pellet* that contains moderate to high levels of protein. There are numerous seed mixes that are marketed for gerbils, but these are not recommended. They contain high levels of fat and can lead to obesity, nutritional deficiencies, and medical problems.

*Treats* may be given in limited quantities. Cereal, breads, pasta, seeds, cheese, fresh fruits, and vegetables may be given in small amounts. Try to avoid the gas-forming vegetables such as broccoli and cauliflower. Grass hay is a great supplement that will be used for both grazing and burrowing.

Even though gerbils are desert species, fresh *water* provided daily is essential. If using water bottles, make sure the sipper tubes do not become clogged. Water bottles need to be changed daily, even though only a small amount has been consumed. Remember to wash your dishes and water bottles at least weekly.

## WHERE SHOULD I KEEP MY GERBIL?

You should *always* keep your gerbil in a cage when he or she is not supervised. Cages should be sufficiently large, measuring at least 36 square inches of floor space per gerbil. Wire cages provide more ventilation than solid structures. Gerbils are great escape artists, so it is important that the plastic or wire of the cage can not be chewed through. The cage floor should be solid and covered in deep bedding and nesting material. Appropriate bedding includes shredded newspaper, recycled newspaper products, shredded tissue, or aspen shavings. Avoid cedar or pine shavings. Place your gerbil's cage in a quiet area of the house. Avoid direct sunlight and cold drafts. The cage should be thoroughly cleaned at least weekly.

Gerbils are natural burrowers and like to explore their environment. Use your imagination to design your gerbil's toys and cage furniture. Tunnels for play and an exercise wheel are very important. Solid exercise wheels are preferred over wire ones. Provide your gerbil with an area for hiding or sleeping. Hay and old mittens or socks are fun things to burrow in!

Some gerbils have very oily coats and can benefit from *sand bathing* for 10-15 minutes several times per week. Soft sand (not dust) may be used.

Gerbils are social, and if introduced at a young age, can be housed together. When mixed as adults, however, they tend to be aggressive.

As with all animals, prevent access to electrical cords, frayed fabric or loose carpet that could be ingested, lead paint, houseplants, pesticides or cleaning products, tobacco and cigarette smoke, and predators.

## VETERINARY CARE

Gerbils do not require any vaccinations, but should have a physical examination performed annually by a veterinarian who is knowledgeable about gerbils. Advanced diagnostics such as blood work and x-rays often require anesthesia.

Approximately 20-40% of gerbils have *epileptic seizures*. In addition, diarrhea, skin diseases, traumatic injuries, and geriatric conditions such as kidney disease and cancer are the most common reasons to visit the veterinarian.

Gerbils hide signs of illness until they are very sick. It is important to contact a veterinarian *early* if you notice any of these signs:

Poor appetite	Diarrhea	Drooling
Overgrown teeth	Tooth grinding	Difficulty eating
Lumps	Excess dandruff	Itchiness
Difficulty urinating	Bleeding	Breathing changes
Sneezing/coughing	Nasal discharge	Listlessness
Weakness	Difficulty walking	Seizures

## DID YOU KNOW?

- Average life span: 2-4 years.
- They are active during the day and night.
- Because they are a desert species, daily water requirements are approximately half of that required in other small rodents. It is important to still always offer fresh water daily.
- Some antibiotics are fatal in gerbils.
- Gerbils have a *ventral marking gland* on their abdomen that is often mistaken for a skin lesion.
- Breeding gerbils form a lifelong, monogamous pair. Both sexes help raise the young.
- An excited or threatened gerbil may exhibit *foot drumming* or rhythmic thumping of the hind legs.
- Grabbing a gerbil's tail without supporting his or her body may result in a *degloving injury* in which you are left holding just the fur!