



# HAMSTERS

Hamsters are small rodents with large cheek pouches. They are relatively easy to care for, and if handled frequently, make good pets. However, they will not hesitate to bite if they feel startled or threatened. If this is your first hamster, 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 hamster veterinarian will discuss how to properly care for your new pet and keep him or her healthy and happy!

## WHAT DO I FEED MY HAMSTER?

Proper nutrition is one of the most important aspects of your hamster's health. Many of the disease conditions we see in hamsters are due to improper diet. In the wild, hamsters eat a mixture of plants, seeds, fruits, and insects. Pet hamsters should be fed a formulated *rodent pellet* that contains moderate to high levels of protein. There are numerous seed mixes that are marketed for hamsters, 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, cheese, cooked lean meats, 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.

Hamsters have large *cheek pouches* to store food. They also tend to hoard food in their cage, making it look as if they eat a lot more than they do.

Finally, 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 with soap and warm water.

## WHERE SHOULD I KEEP MY HAMSTER?

You should *always* keep your hamster in a cage when he or she is not supervised. Cages should be sufficiently large, measuring at least 19 square inches of floor space per hamster. Wire cages provide more ventilation than solid structures. Hamsters 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 hamster's cage in a quiet area of the house. Avoid direct sunlight and cold drafts. The cage should be thoroughly cleaned at least once to twice weekly.

Hamsters are natural burrowers and like to explore their environment. Use your imagination to design your hamster'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 hamster with an area for hiding or sleeping.

Hamsters are generally housed singly, as most tend to be aggressive towards each other if housed in pairs.

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 unsupervised dogs or cats.

## VETERINARY CARE

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

Diarrhea or wet tail, skin diseases, respiratory diseases, impacted cheek pouches, and geriatric conditions such as heart disease and cancer (lymphoma) are the most common reasons to visit the veterinarian.

Hamsters 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/hair loss
Difficulty urinating	Bleeding	Difficult breathing
Sneezing/coughing	Nasal discharge	Listlessness
Weakness	Difficulty walking	Pain

## DID YOU KNOW?

- Average life span: 2-3 years.
- The most popular hamster is the *golden* or *Syrian* hamster. *Russian* or *dwarf* hamsters are smaller and are also becoming quite popular. They come in a variety of coat colors and types.
- All Syrian hamsters have descended from a family in Palestine in 1930. They were introduced to the United States in 1938.
- They are *nocturnal* (active at night).
- Hamsters are capable of running 10 km per night!
- Some antibiotics are fatal in hamsters.
- Cheek pouches can extend as far back as the shoulder blades!
- Golden hamsters have paired *flank glands*, which are more visible in males. Russian hamsters have a gland in the middle of the abdomen.