

CARING FOR YOUR GERBIL(S)

Congratulations on becoming a gerbil guardian! Adding another member to your family is a **big commitment and responsibility**. Your gerbil is **100 percent dependent** on you for everything – healthy food, fresh water, a clean home, a stress-free environment, exercise, playtime, medical attention and **LOTS OF LOVE!** These are the ingredients vital to the health and well-being of this animal that boasts a long and prodigious record of survival. You owe it to your gerbil to learn everything you can about its care. It is your responsibility to understand its needs. **A gerbil must not simply be locked in a cage and ignored.** Please don't add to your orphaned gerbil's prior misery by not taking proper care of it. **If you are not going to commit to playing with your gerbil every day, then you are not the proper guardian for a gerbil.**

The following information is meant to be a **starting block** for a responsible pet guardian new to gerbils. Please take the time to learn more about these animals through **books and Web sites**. Also, keep in mind that there is **misinformation** out there too. Just because you read or hear something does not mean it is true. Please use your **common sense**, and if you're not sure, just ask.

A word about breeding

No one should ever breed gerbils unless they are experts in genetics. Inbreeding can lead to serious medical problems in the general gerbil population. In addition, breeding contributes to the problem of small animal overpopulation. There are plenty of gerbils sold at pet stores who are eventually orphaned and abandoned at animal shelters. Visit your local shelter or rescue instead of breeding your own. If you're really interested in the miracle of raising babies, ask to foster a pregnant gerbil. You can experience all the joys of seeing the babies grow up, and you are contributing to the greater good of the rescue community. Now that is something to feel good about!

Support orphaned gerbils!

Gerbils make wonderful pets and yet they have a bad reputation as ornery creatures. Pet stores contribute to the problem of pet overpopulation and abandonment by housing gerbils in overcrowded, unsanitary conditions and giving the public too little information on their care. You have taken the first step toward solving this problem by adopting your own orphaned gerbil. Please continue to support orphaned gerbils by referring friends and family to your local animal shelter or rescue to adopt a gerbil. Ask them to be a part of the solution, not the problem. Just like dogs, cats and people, gerbils deserve second chances too!

ABOUT GERBILS

In this section you will be learning some basic facts about gerbils and a quick lesson on where they came from and how they came to be pets in the United States.

History

The Mongolian gerbil, also known as the desert rat, originates from **Mongolia and Northern China** and is an **extremely good digger**, digging with its front paws and kicking debris away with its **strong hind legs**.

The Mongolian gerbil was found by Pere David, a French missionary, in the 1860s. In the 1930s, Professor Kasugo from the Japanese Kitasata Institute captured wild Mongolian gerbils and was the first to breed them in captivity. However, it was not until the 1950s that they were studied widely by scientists and later imported into the United States by Dr. Victor Schwentker where they were used in laboratories for scientific research.

In the 1960s, Mongolian gerbils were imported into the United Kingdom, and by the 1970s they had become a popular pet in many countries.

General information

* Gerbils are active, curious animals. They like to **sit up on their haunches** and view what is going on. They also like to **burrow**.

* They live **three to five years**.

* Gerbils are active in both the day and night; they sleep at intervals for a couple of hours.

* **ONE OR TWO?** Gerbils are highly social animals and do not like being alone at all. **They can be solitary pets but they prefer company.** Lone gerbils live shorter, less healthy lives. They tend to be less friendly and harder to tame. They need and deserve a companion to eat with, sleep with, and share grooming.

* Full-grown Mongolian gerbils reach a length of **12-14 cm from nose to the base of the tail**; the **tail is about 8-10 cm**. The head is broad and short and the tail is covered in fur with a small tuft at the end. They weigh **75-120 grams**; their body temperature is 94-103 degrees Fahrenheit; their heart rate is **260-600 beats** per minute; their respiratory rate is 70-120 per minute. They have four toes in front and five toes in rear.

* The **more you handle** your gerbils, the **tamer** they will be.

* Gerbils create **little odor** and rarely **bite** (and then out of fear, not anger).

* Remember that, as with any pet, there is a **long-term commitment**. For gerbils, that commitment can be as long as four to five years. If you are buying gerbils for a child they will need to understand the responsibility that they are taking on.

You, as the adult, will have the obligation to monitor and support the child to ensure that the gerbil will be well taken care of.

PREPARING FOR YOUR GERBIL

OK, so you've had a basic lesson in gerbils and have a pretty good sense of what they are all about. Now you'll want to get your gerbils' home all ready for them so that when they arrive home you simply have to place them in their new house. The following section on housing will give you some guidelines on what to buy and how to arrange the cage.

Housing

There are many options out there for gerbil cages. A simple guideline is to buy one as roomy as you can afford. Think about it: Would you prefer to live in a closet or a spacious bedroom? Especially if you spent most of your time in your room, and you shared it with siblings.

Here we'll discuss some options for gerbil housing.

* An **aquarium** with a secure, well-ventilated top is the ideal gerbil home. It should be **at least 10 gallons**. Aquariums are easy to clean, minimize drafts, and prevent bedding from being kicked onto the floor. Aquariums can often be purchased inexpensively from second-hand stores.

* **Wire cages are not recommended.** Gerbils love to rearrange and dig in their bedding. If they are housed in a wire cage, you will constantly be cleaning up bedding from the floor. Second, gerbils love to chew. Chewing on wire bars can be very harmful to your gerbil's teeth and mouth. Third, it is very easy for a gerbil to get their legs caught between the bars and hurt themselves.

* **Plastic Habitrail homes** have poor ventilation, become smelly very quickly, and are easy to escape from. Also, over a short period of time, your gerbils will chew it to bits, and you will have to buy another one.

Bedding

Once you've chosen the cage, you'll have to buy some bedding to put in the cage.

Gerbils require bedding for **urine absorption**, as well as for **digging fun**. Your gerbils should be given **at least three inches** of bedding to play and burrow in. The general rule is to fill the aquarium **1/3 full** of bedding.

Never use pine or cedar bedding because it causes respiratory problems and liver damage. Do not use newspaper unless you know it is printed with soy-based ink. Shredded paper of any kind will start to smell very quickly. **Do not use sawdust, corn cob bedding or cat litter.**

The best choice is **CareFRESH bedding**, which is made from recycled wood pulp. It is 100% safe for your gerbils and lasts longer than other types of bedding because it is extremely absorbent. CareFRESH is available at Superpetz and PetsMart, online at

www.theferretstore.com, and wholesale through the manufacturer at www.absorbent.com (if you would like to boycott the pet stores because of their sale of small animals).

Nesting Material

Now your gerbils need some material to build nests. **Plain white unscented tissue** provides a safe and inexpensive nesting material. Shred it into narrow strips and leave the rest to them as they build great **whip cream castles** out of tissue paper!

WARNING: Commercial nesting material looks soft and fluffy and perfect for a lovely nest, however it is very dangerous to gerbils. Gerbils can become entangled in it and risk a loss of circulation, not to mention a limb. (Even if it only happens to 1 in a 100 gerbils, it's not worth the risk!) They can eat small amounts that may later cause a blockage.

Nesting Box



A simple nesting box will provide your gerbils a nice place to **sleep, hide and find some privacy**. You can make a nesting box out of wood, or buy a commercial one at a pet store; the Timber Hideaway is a good choice. A plastic one (such as an igloo) is not recommended, since the gerbils would chew it within a week.

Water Bottle

Each tank/cage will need its own water bottle. There are a number of styles and most come with a simple wire hanger to use with cages. Go for the **8-ounce** size. If you are using an aquarium you will need to purchase a **special bottle holder/shield**. Be sure that the **tip of the water bottle is well above the bedding**. If the tip comes in contact with the bedding or other material it will drain out in a matter of hours. Even though gerbils are a desert animal they require **clean, fresh water at all times**.

Check the water every day to make sure it has not run dry and is operating properly. (When you tap your finger to the nipple, you should get a drop of water.) If it is not working, it is time to purchase a new one. Gerbils can become dehydrated very quickly.

Food Dish

A food dish is not necessary; food can be placed directly on the bedding in the center of the tank allowing the gerbils to forage. Food can also be served in **small ceramic dishes** sold at stores.. Most gerbils will bury their food dish in their bedding. This is their way of protecting it from other gerbils. Don't worry; they will be able to find it with no problem.

Toys and Exercise

Gerbils are very active animals, and they need an entertaining environment. Let your imagination be your guide.

A four by four makes a great toy. Have several large holes drilled through it. Ask whether the lumberyard will do the cutting and drilling for you. They are also cheap, as

you can use scrap pieces. This will provide the gerbils with entertainment and a great chew toy.

WARNING: Be sure that the lumber is not treated!

Special wooden play/chew toys can be purchase at pet stores in the shape of cheese wedges or treasure chests.

Every time you finish off a **roll of toilet paper** add it to the aquarium. The gerbils will run in and out of the tube before settling down to a good gnaw. They love it, but within a few hours it will be shredded. For those having multiple tanks, you might find yourself getting these from family, friends, co-workers...anywhere you can to keep your gerbils "**in cardboard.**" Heavier cardboard boxes work well to climb on and nest in and will last longer.

You can use the traditional hamster wheel in your aquariums. BUT... you must take precaution before using one with your gerbil.

WARNING! Do not purchase the wire wheels sold in pet stores. These wheels have spaces between the rungs – spaces where tails and limbs can become trapped! Instead, use only a wheel that is made from **one solid plastic piece.** An excellent wheel is the **large Comfort wheel** sold at pet stores and online at www.theferretstore.com.

GERBIL HANDLING

You've got the cage set up, and your new gerbils are safe and snuggly in their new home. Now what do you do with them? This section will explain the finer points of gerbil handling.

First, give your new charges a **few hours to settle** into their new home. **Then introduce your hand into the tank and let them sniff.** You might find them trying to taste you and find out if you are edible. This should not hurt; just slowly move your hand away. Young gerbils are particularly prone to this as it's part of their "put everything in your mouth" stage. They will outgrow this.

Rest your hand still in the bottom of the tank. The gerbils will cautiously explore your hand for a while. If they appear scared and run away, don't push it. **Just put your hand in their cage for several minutes a few times each day. Pick sunflower seeds out of the food mix and set these aside. This is the perfect opportunity to teach you new gerbils that great treats come from your hands.** Place a few sunflower seeds or peanuts in your palm and they will soon associate tasty things with your hands.

If you want to pick your gerbils up, scoot them into a corner and gently lift them up in two hands. NEVER, NEVER, NEVER pick a gerbil up by their tail, not even the base of the tail. A gerbil tail is jointed and can break off in the middle. Also, the skin can tear, leaving exposed bone. Do not chase them around the cage, and do not swoop down from above. If you can't get them

into your hands, then you can start by lifting them up using a cup. They usually explore these and then you can pick them up once they're inside.

After a week or two of doing these exercises, your gerbils will happily let you pick them up. **You can teach them to sit still on your shoulder or elbow while you walk around.** Soon they'll start "signaling" when they want out of their cage. They usually do this by standing on their hind legs and resting their forepaws against the glass and hopping up and down a bit. Some learn to spring straight up in the air when they see you.

Gerbils need and deserve time out of their aquarium everyday. To accommodate this need, you can set up a **playpen** for them using a Rubbermaid or similar type transparent **storage container**. It should be at least **60 quarts**. (WalMart sells one for \$6). Put a few inches of bedding on the bottom, place a good free-standing Comfort wheel in the playpen and put down some toys including tubes, blocks and toilet paper. Hide treats throughout the playpen. You can have your gerbil out for an hour or more in her playpen and everyone in the household can interact with her. This gives her **a break from her cage**, where she spends all her time. It is a **new environment** to explore. You can change it around a little each day to make life interesting. This kind of playpen is inexpensive and easy to clean and move around.

ROUTINE CARE

Now that you have your gerbils' home all set up, and you have learned how to handle them properly, it's time to discuss their routine care – what you need to do on a regular basis to take care of them.

Cleaning

Gerbils are very clean animals. They should have their aquarium cleaned **once a week**. Simply remove the old bedding and nesting material, clean the tank with a mild dish solution and water, dry it with a towel, and replenish with fresh bedding and nesting material.

When cleaned properly, on a regular basis, **Gerbil homes should never smell.**

Feeding

Fresh food should be provided each and every day. Gerbils eat 10-15 grams of food per day and they drink 4-10 ml per day. A good premixed gerbil food is recommended. It is easy to get the right combination of protein, minerals, vitamins, and bulk. Sunflower seeds tend to be very high in protein, and, therefore, fattening. A good idea is to pick out the sunflower seeds and hand feed them to your gerbils over the course of the day. This has a double benefit. First, no one gerbil hoards them and gets too fat. Second, it is an excellent way to hand tame and bond with your gerbils.

The gerbil mix provides a good basic diet, but **gerbils also enjoy fruits and vegetables.** It is important that fruits and veggies be introduced **gradually**; sudden large amounts can

cause diarrhea. Give a small piece of fruit or vegetable once or twice a week, then over the next few weeks give larger amounts feed each day. If the gerbil shows signs of diarrhea stop feeding fruits and vegetables until the diarrhea goes away, then reintroduce them.

The gerbil should **only be fed an amount it will eat**. If the gerbil is given too much, it will food in the cage that can become moldy.

The following fruits and vegetables are **safe** to feed gerbils:

Apple (seedless)	cucumber
Broccoli	lettuce (small amounts occasionally)
Carrots	parsley
Cauliflower leaves and stalks	

Warning: The following fruits and vegetables are **NOT** safe to feed gerbils:

Raw kidney beans	raw rhubarb
Onion	rhubarb leaves
Raw potato	tomato leaves
Potato tops	

Gerbils can also be fed **plants and flowers** – but make sure you are absolutely certain of the identification of what you are feeding your gerbil.

The following plants and flowers are **safe** to feed gerbils:

Chickweed	dandelion
Clover	yarrow
Coltsfoot	

WARNING: The following plants and flowers are **poisonous** to gerbils:

Black nightshade	laburnum
Buttercups	laurel
Clematis	oleander
Daffodil	poinsettia
Deadly nightshade	rhododenderon
Hemlock	yew
Hyrdangea	yucca
ivy	

There are many gerbil treats sold in pet stores. They are designed as treats and should not be fed in large quantities. The overfeeding of treats which are **high in sugar** could lead to your gerbil becoming **obese**.

You can also feed your gerbil treats from food you might have in your house. Treats that are **safe** to fed to your gerbil are:

Biscuits	scrambled or boiled egg
Boiled potatoes	raisins

Bread	sultanas
Low fat breakfast cereals (Cheerios, Rice Krispies)	toast
Cheese (small amounts occasionally)	dog biscuits
Currants	

WARNING: The following treats are **NOT** safe to feed your gerbil:

Chocolate	raw kidney beans
Garlic	sweets
Onions	toffee
Rabbit mix	

Health

While you have your gerbil out each day, check her over for signs of ill health. Some signs that something could be wrong include ruffled coat, clicking noises, hunching, diarrhea, listlessness, not eating or drinking, red noses and scratching.

If your gerbil develops any of these signs, it is your responsibility as his guardian to take him to the vet immediately, just as you would for your child. Gerbils are vulnerable creatures and often need treatment right away if they are to recover.

A list of vets treating small animals is provided to you along with this packet.