

Gerbil Care Information

Gerbils are active and curious animals. They live an average of three to four years. They love to dig tunnels and chew. Gerbils have poor eyesight but good hearing and a good sense of smell. They go through several sleep/active cycles throughout the day and night. Gerbils are very social animals and need the companionship of their own species. It is unnatural for them to live alone. Gerbils should always be kept in at least same gender pairs. They enjoy grooming together, eating together, playing together, curling up to sleep together and just being together.

Introductions between single gerbils are often successful. Introductions must be done very slowly and carefully. You can not simply get a second gerbil and put it in with your current gerbil. You will have a fight and injured/dead gerbils. We recommend the split tank method of introduction. For more information about the split tank method, please visit www.twinsqueaks.com. Make sure to read all four articles on Split-Cage Introductions.

HOUSING

There is no such thing as a habitat that is too big. Your gerbils will be spending a majority of their time in their habitat, so it should provide as much floor space as possible. It should be safe, roomy, comfortable and interesting.

Gerbils are best kept in an aquarium. It should be a minimum of 24 inches long and 12 inches wide for a single or a pair and a minimum of 30 inches long for a trio or foursome. (A 10 gallon aquarium is too small as a permanent habitat -- even for a single gerbil.) It is better to have a long aquarium with more floor space than a tall aquarium with unused height. The longer the better! The aquarium should have a secure, well-ventilated, coated wire, screen lid. The lid should lift off the aquarium vertically, rather than slide off horizontally. An exercise wheel can not be attached to a lid that slides off to the side.

Twenty gallon aquariums are usually 24 inches in length. Twenty gallon “long” aquariums are usually 30 inches in length. Twenty gallon aquariums and twenty gallon “long” aquariums are usually the same price. We strongly encourage the use of twenty gallon “long” aquariums.

Gerbils will quickly chew up and destroy a plastic cage, and they will kick their bedding out of a wire cage. Gerbils can also damage their teeth and noses chewing on the bars of a wire cage.

Clean your gerbils' habitat at least once a week.

BEDDING

Use Carefresh Bedding. It is the safest and healthiest bedding choice for your gerbils. It is available at most pet stores and through Small Angels Rescue. Aspen bedding is an acceptable second choice. Never use pine, cedar, sawdust, corn cob bedding, chlorophyll bedding or cat litter. Pine and cedar are poisonous to all animals! We (usually) have 50 Liter bags of Carefresh bedding available for purchase at our adoption events (cheaper than the pet store).

Gerbils love to dig tunnels. Provide several inches of bedding for burrowing fun!

HIDE-AWAY

Gerbils enjoy a cozy space for sleeping and relaxation. Provide a wooden nesting box. Do not use plastic. Do not use the edible “Snak Shack” hide-aways. They are made from compressed pine, alfalfa and honey and are extremely unhealthy. Do not use the commercial nesting “fluff” from the store. It is unsafe. Commercial fluff can become wrapped around limbs and/or bind up in an animal's intestines if swallowed.

WATER

Use an 8 ounce hanging water bottle that has an angled stainless steel sipper tube with a ball bearing in the spout. A glass water bottle is strongly recommended, but a plastic water bottle is acceptable. Glass water bottles can often be found with bird supplies. If you choose to use a plastic water bottle, you may need a water bottle guard to keep the gerbils from puncturing the bottle with their teeth. Give your gerbils fresh water everyday. Filtered water is strongly recommended, especially if you are on city water.

FOOD

Provide a ceramic food dish. Do not use plastic. Feed your gerbils a quality mix made specifically for gerbils. We recommend...

Gerri Gerbil made by Supreme (First Choice)
Available in some pet stores and online – including www.petfooddirect.com

Ecotriton Organic Hamster & Gerbil Food
Available in pet stores and online.

Linda's Premium Organic Rodent Mix
Available from www.otherlivingthings.com and www.craftyrat.com

Carefresh Complete Food for Gerbils and Hamsters
This food is okay. It's not the best and it's not the worst. Available in pet stores, online and through Small Angels Rescue.

Oxbow Healthy Handfuls
A hay based food that can be added to a commercial mix for variety. We do not recommend feeding it exclusively. Available in some pet stores, online and through Small Angels Rescue.

DO NOT use Kaytee, Hartz, L&M or Nutriphase products. They contain a controversial antioxidant preservative called Ethoxyquin which is linked to cancer, organ damage, birth defects and other serious health problems. Also avoid foods that contain BHA and/or BHT.

We **highly** recommend mixing additional dry items into any/all commercial foods – like whole oats, whole grain wheat, barley, millet, kashi, spelt, quinoa, kamut, uncooked brown rice, uncooked vegetable pasta, dehydrated vegetables, flax seeds, sesame seeds and pumpkin seeds. Just mix right into the food.

Gerbils enjoy a variety of fresh vegetables a few times a week. Gerbils often enjoy, among other things, broccoli, carrots, cauliflower, celery, corn, cucumber, parsley, peas and red pepper.

Fresh fruit can be used as a treat. Gerbils often enjoy, among other things, apples, bananas, blueberries, grapes, kiwi, melon, peaches, pears and strawberries.

Gerbils may also enjoy tofu and hard boiled or scrambled egg.

Use common sense when feeding your gerbils, and introduce new foods slowly. Avoid iceberg lettuce, dried corn, raw beans, potato eyes, green potato, green parts of tomatoes, garlic, chocolate, processed foods and any sugary or salty foods.

Do not give your gerbils a mineral or salt wheel. They are not necessary or healthy. Mineral and salt wheels are made with glue, and salt wheels are bleached. You can give your gerbils natural wood chews that have not been artificially colored. You can also give them dried apple tree branches that have been aged at least three months and have not been sprayed with pesticides.

HAY

Gerbils require and enjoy moderate to large handfuls of timothy hay or orchard grass several times a week. They like to play in it, nibble it and add it to their nests. Hay can be found at pet stores. Avoid alfalfa hay.

EXERCISE and PLAY

Gerbils require an exercise wheel. The exercise wheel should be at least 8 inches in diameter.

Wire Mesh Wheels

We recommend wire mesh wheels and have them available for purchase. The mesh should be covered with masking tape to create a safe, solid running surface.

Wheels With Metal Bars/Rungs

It's very dangerous for gerbils to run on a wheel with rungs. Their feet, legs and/or tail can slip between the rungs, get caught and break. The rungs should be covered with masking tape to create a safe, solid running surface.

Plastic Wheels

If you give gerbils a plastic wheel, they may chew it and could possibly ingest some plastic.

Solid Metal Wheels

We have yet to find them in pet stores but they are available online.

Flip the exercise wheel upside down, and attach the four corners of the base of the wheel to the screen lid of the aquarium with twist ties. That will keep the wheel clear of the bedding and the gerbils won't be able to knock it down and bury it.

Gerbils love to chew. Provide your gerbils with safe items to chew on everyday. It gives them something to do, and it keeps their teeth worn down. You can give them hay, cardboard toilet and paper towel tubes, natural wood chews and other similar items. Check out www.busybunny.com, www.forotheotherlivingthings.com and www.leithpetwerks.com for lots of fun, safe and edible toys that are appropriate for gerbils. Rotate toys and chews every few days to keep life interesting.

Gerbils need time out of their habitat everyday. You can let them run around a gerbil proofed room or bathroom, or you can use a large Rubbermaid tub as a playpen. Another good playpen is the Grrreat Wall which can be ordered on-line. Gerbils can easily get out of the fence-type playpens, so keep an extra close eye on your gerbils if you choose to use a fence-type playpen.

NEVER put your gerbils in an exercise ball. Exercise balls are dangerous and stressful for all animals. Rodents have poor eyesight. In a ball their vision is even more limited. They always run into furniture and walls, which they don't see coming. It's like a car crash for them. They back up to try and get away and end up crashing into something else. It's very stressful. In addition, paws can get pinched/broken in the air slits. Animals can become over-heated. If they go to the bathroom in the ball, they have to run in their own waste. Furthermore, their great joy in life is exploring and checking things out with their paws and noses. They can't do that in a plastic bubble. Provide a large, safe play area for your gerbils and trash the ball!

DUST BATH

Gerbils often enjoy a dust bath a few times a week. The bathing dust/sand can be purchased on-line and at most pet stores. It is often found with the chinchilla supplies. Put the dust/sand in a glass jar laid on its side for bathing fun. It usually works best to offer the dust bath in the exercise area instead of in the aquarium. You can reuse the sand as long as it is clean and not soiled by urine, hay, food, etc. Please use only unscented bathing dust/sand.

HANDLING

Before you pick your gerbils up, make sure you have clean hands that do not smell like food. Make sure your gerbils are fully awake and aware of your presence. Scoop your gerbils up gently using both hands, a cup or a cardboard tube. **NEVER** pick your gerbils up by the tail, not even the base of the tail. The tail can break off or the skin can rip, leaving exposed bone.

WEBSITES:

www.egerbil.com
www.twinsqueaks.com
www.busybunny.com
www.forotheotherlivingthings.com
www.leithpetwerks.com

We welcome questions!

Please email gerbils@smallangelsrescue.org or call 301-668-0404 for more information. You can see our adoptable animals online at www.smallangels.petfinder.com.