

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 can be 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 be as big 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. (A 10 gallon aquarium is too small as a permanent habitat, even for a single gerbil.) The aquarium should have a secure, well-ventilated, coated wire, screen lid. It is better to have a long aquarium with more floor space than a tall aquarium with unused height. The longer the better! 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 and is available at most pet stores. 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! Gerbils love to dig tunnels. Provide several inches of bedding for burrowing fun. We (usually) have 50 Liter bags of Carefresh bedding available for purchase at our adoption events.

HIDE-AWAY

Gerbils enjoy a cozy space for sleeping and relaxation. Provide a wooden nesting box. Do not use plastic. Use unscented toilet paper or paper towels for nesting material. Do not use the commercial "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 eight ounce hanging water bottle that has an angled stainless steel sipper tube with a ball bearing in the spout. A glass water bottle is preferable, but a plastic water bottle is acceptable. If your gerbils chew through their water bottle you will need a water bottle guard. Give your gerbils fresh water everyday. Filtered water is best.

FOOD

Provide a ceramic food dish. Do not use plastic. Feed your gerbils a quality mix made specifically for gerbils. We recommend Piccolo Certified Organic Hamster/Gerbil Food and/or Supreme brand Gerri Gerbil Food. Oxbow Healthy Handfuls can be added to Piccolo and Supreme for variety. Piccolo is available online. Gerri Gerbil is available online and at some pet stores. Oxbow is available online, at some independent pet stores and some veterinary practices. We (usually) have Gerri Gerbil and Oxbow Healthy Handfuls available for purchase at our adoption events.

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.

Gerbils enjoy a variety of fresh vegetables a few times a week. Gerbils often enjoy, among other things, broccoli, carrots, cauliflower, celery, cucumber, green pepper, 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, in small quantities, whole oats, spray millet, whole wheat bread, pumpkin seeds, flax seeds, 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 need and enjoy moderate 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 need and enjoy an exercise wheel. The exercise wheel should be at least 8 inches in diameter. If you give them a plastic wheel, they will (most likely) chew it up and could possibly ingest some plastic. You can use a wire mesh wheel or a wire rung wheel. Wire rung wheels **MUST** be modified first to make them safe. It's 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. To make a wire wheel safe, cover it with masking tape. Then you have a wheel with a solid running surface that the gerbils can't chew to pieces. Solid metal exercise wheels are available on-line. Flip the exercise wheel upside down, and attach 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, dried apple branches and other similar items. Check out www.busybunny.com and www.leithpetwerks.com for lots of fun, safe and edible toys that are appropriate for gerbils.

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 ceramic bowl 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.leithpetwerks.com

Interested in gerbils?

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

