

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. Gerbils are not nocturnal. They go through several sleep/active cycles throughout the day and night.

Gerbils are very social animals and usually do best with the companionship of their own species. It is unnatural for them to live alone. Whenever possible, gerbils should 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 Twin Squeaks. Make sure you read all four articles on Split-Cage Introductions. We are also happy to talk with you in more detail about the introduction process.

www.twinsqueaks.com

Sometimes it is not possible to find a friend for a single gerbil. Single gerbils can do okay by themselves but definitely need plenty of attention.

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. Their home should be safe, roomy, comfortable and interesting.

Gerbils are best kept in an aquarium. **The aquarium should be at least 30 inches long and 12 inches wide.** This will accommodate up to four gerbils.

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 on and off the aquarium vertically, rather than slide off horizontally. You want to be able to attach the exercise wheel to the lid and can not do that with a lid that slides off to the side.

www.craigslist.org

www.freecycle.org

and Goodwill/thrift stores are all great places to look for gently used aquariums at reasonable prices.

Plastic and wire habitats are not appropriate for gerbils. 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. (Please let us know in advance if you would like to purchase bedding through the rescue.) Aspen bedding is an acceptable second choice. You can also mix Carefresh and aspen together to benefit from the coziness of the Carefresh and the cheaper price of aspen.

Another bedding option to mix in is Hunt Club bedding available at Southern States. It is very economical. It is made out of small pieces of cardboard. We do not recommend using it by itself, but it is great as an add in.

Never use pine, cedar, sawdust, corn cob bedding, chlorophyll bedding or cat litter. Pine and cedar are poisonous to all animals!

Gerbils are burrowing animals and 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. Since gerbils love to chew, plastic igloos/hide-aways should be avoided. The Timber Hide-a-Way and Woodland Get-a-way are good choices.

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, as they are more hygienic, chew-proof and kinder to the environment. Glass water bottles can often be found with bird supplies. Plastic is an acceptable second choice. 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.

Make sure to tap the ball bearing in the spout with your finger every time you change the water to make sure it is working properly.

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)

Gerri Gerbil has become difficult to find in stores. You may be able to find it in some pet stores or request your pet store carry it. You can also sometimes find it online. A good place to try is www.petfooddirect.com.

Ecotrition Organic Hamster & Gerbil Food

Available in pet stores and online.

Linda's Premium Organic Rodent Mix

Available from www.craftyrat.com

Carefresh Complete Food for Gerbils and Hamsters

This food is okay if you can't find anything else. It's not the best, but it's not the worst. It's available in pet stores and online.

Oxbow Healthy Handfuls

This is a quality hay based food that can be added to another commercial mix for variety. We do not recommend feeding it exclusively. It's 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 and smaller amounts of flax seeds, sesame seeds and pumpkin seeds. Just mix right into the food. We will give you a list as a reference. Also, check out the bulk section of your grocery store for a variety of options.

Gerbils enjoy a variety of fresh vegetables two to three 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 on occasion.

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 and online. Avoid alfalfa hay.

Oxbow offers a nine pound box of hay. (Their hay is gorgeous!) If kept dry, hay does not go bad. Purchasing a larger quantity of hay, rather than multiple small bags from the pet store, is more economical and convenient in the long run. Any place that carries Oxbow products should be able to order hay for you. For Pete's Sake in Middletown, MD, will happily order any Oxbow products.

www.for-petes-sake.com
www.oxbowhay.com

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 (with advance notice). The mesh should be covered with masking tape, duct tape or painter's 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. It does happen! These wheels are not recommended but can be covered with tape to create a safe running surface.

Plastic Wheels

If you give gerbils a plastic wheel, they will most likely chew it and could possibly ingest some plastic. Plastic wheels are not recommended.

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, bang it against the sides of the aquarium or bury it. If you are unable to attach the exercise wheel to the lid, you can tape the wheel to the floor of the tank to keep it steady.

Gerbils need time out of their habitat everyday. A large Rubbermaid tub makes an excellent playpen. Another good playpen is the Grrreat Wall which can be ordered online. 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 until someone gets them out. Furthermore, their great joy in life is exploring and checking things out with their paws and noses, interacting directly with their environment. They can't do that in a plastic bubble. Provide a large, safe area for your gerbils to play freely and trash the ball!

CHEWING

Gerbils love to chew. Provide your gerbils with a rotating variety of safe items to chew on everyday. It gives them something to do, and it keeps their teeth worn down. In addition to hay, you can give them cardboard toilet paper and paper towel tubes, cholla cactus chews, bark bites, pumice stones, lava bites, willow balls and wreaths, apple twigs, loofah rings and other similar items. The websites...

www.tjschinchillasupplies.com
www.busybunny.com
www.leithpetwerks.com

...have a wonderful variety of safe and edible chews and toys. TJ's Chinchilla Supplies generously donates supplies to various rescues, including Small Angels. By supporting them you are also supporting rescues and rescued animals.

Rotate toys and chews everyday to keep life interesting.

DUST BATH

Gerbils often enjoy a dust bath a few times a week. The bathing dust/sand can be purchased online and at most pet stores. It is often found with the chinchilla supplies. A clean glass jar laid on its side works great as a bathing house. 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.tjschinchillasupplies.com
www.egerbil.com
www.twinsqueaks.com
www.busybunny.com
www.leithpetwerks.com
www.oxbowhay.com
www.for-petes-sake.com

We welcome questions!

Please email gerbils@smallangelsrescue.org for more information. You can see our adoptable animals online at www.smallangels.petfinder.com.