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Hamster Care Information

Hamsters are wonderful small animals. Although they are very small, hamsters can travel long distances. Wild hamsters can travel 5 to 12 miles in one night searching for food. They can run fast and jump. Hamsters are nocturnal—they sleep during the day and are active at night. A hamster's life span is around 1,000 days, or two to three years.

There is nothing that hamsters enjoy more than exploring and climbing. Hamsters have good hearing. They'll stand to listen closely to an interesting sound. Hamsters have a keen sense of smell. They use it, along with their whiskers, to navigate. Hamsters have poor eyesight. They don't realize how high up they are when on a sofa, bed, or other high surface, and they may walk right off, so it's important to always keep an eye on your hammy. Teeth chattering means your hamster is upset and should be left alone for a while.

The well-bred, well-socialized hamster that is properly housed, entertained, and cared for should be a gentle, sweet-natured animal that comes to know and trust her owner and to enjoy the time they spend together. The bond that can form between a hamster and a human can be surprisingly sound and touching!

VARIETIES OF HAMSTERS

There are more than 20 kinds of hamsters in the wild, but only a few have been domesticated. Classic golden, or Syrian, hamsters are usually about 6 to 8 inches long and weigh 3 to 5 ounces. Syrian hamsters must live alone or they will fight, sometimes even to the death. They are colorblind and see their surroundings in black and white. They come in many colors. One variety is the teddy bear, or long-haired. The female Syrian hamster is typically larger than the male.

The Campbell's Russian dwarf hamster is about 2 to 3 inches long, 1 to 2 ounces, and round and fuzzy with plentiful fur on his tail and feet. Dwarf hamsters can live in pairs if they are raised together. The Winter White Russian hamster is similar but a bit smaller and turns white in winter. The dwarf has delicate feet, a soft coat, compact physique and a dorsal stripe running down his back.

Other species are Chinese and Roborovski hamsters—variations on the dwarf hamster.

COMPANIONSHIP

Golden or Syrian hamsters are solitary animals. If kept together, they will fight, sometimes to the death. Even though pet stores often house Syrians together, this is a harmful situation for the animals. It leads to competition, aggressiveness, unsanitary conditions, and, in the case of mistaken sexing, babies.

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Dwarf hamsters, on the other hand, are sociable and prefer each other's company. They are best kept in same-gender pairs if they have been together since birth.

PREPARING FOR YOUR HAMSTER

Before you bring home your new hamster, you'll want to get everything ready for her so that when she arrives you can simply place her in her new home. In this section we'll discuss what you'll need to purchase for your hamster and how to get your home ready for her.

CAGES

Your hamster is going to spend most of her time in her house. It should be safe, comfortable, roomy, and interesting. Provide your hamster with the largest home possible. In the wild, a hamster burrow has many rooms and can be several feet underground. The domesticated hamster similarly prefers large spaces but must live indoors as he will not know how to survive in the elements. If the cage is too small, your hamster may become protective and nippy.

Your hamster will enjoy a home with many cubbies and tunnels. These can be made using common household products, such as paper towel and toilet paper rolls. Don't crowd a cage with too many toys; instead, rotate toys to keep life interesting.

There are dozens of kinds of hamster cages sold at pet stores and online, but be aware that many of them are not suitable for hamster habitats. A cage box may promise the cage is roomy, safe and fun, but don't take the box at its word.

Please see the *Small Angels Rescue Guide to Hamster Cages* for more information on suitable cages, along with photos, price ranges, places where you can find them, and modifications to make to each cage to make them safe hammy habitats.

Your hamster's cage should be kept away from direct sunlight. Heat and exposure to direct sun can be extremely harmful to your hamster's health. Remember that sunlight changes during the day, so a shady spot in the morning might be a sunny spot in the afternoon. The cage should be away from loud noises such as televisions or stereos. The cage should be in a well-ventilated area away from drafts and vents. Drafts can contribute to respiratory problems. The ideal draft-free temperature for hamsters is anywhere from 65 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit. They are creatures of the desert yet prefer the same temperatures as humans. Keep the cage away from cords, cleaning solvents, chemical agents, and other household pets.

BEDDING

Once you've selected a cage, it's time to select bedding to place in the cage. Your hamster will need bedding to absorb urine and provide a comfortable place to rest. Place 2 to 3 inches of bedding on the bottom of the cage. Clean your hamster's entire home once a week. Your hamster will usually/typically go to the bathroom in the same spot. You can clean their potty corner every day or two with a

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spoon—add a little fresh bedding. Also be sure to remove stored food every few days so that it does not become moldy.

Many of the bedding types sold at pet stores are harmful to hamsters' health and should never be used. Consult the following chart for information on different types of bedding.

| <u>Type of Bedding</u> | <u>Notes</u> |
|-------------------------------|--|
| CareFRESH and CareFRESH ultra | Preferred bedding; made from recycled newspaper; gentle on hamsters' respiratory systems |
| Pine | Use only if unscented and kiln-dried |
| Aspen | Use only if two above are unavailable |
| Cedar | Do not use; causes infections and allergies |
| Corn cob | Do not use |
| Cat litter | Do not use |

OTHER CAGE ACCESSORIES

Water Bottle: Use a 4-oz. minimum hanging water bottle and change the water daily. Use only water bottles that have a ball bearing. Holders are available to fix the bottle to the side of an aquarium. Do not use a water dish, which can become spilled. If your hamster goes without water for long, she faces the risk of dehydration. Also, water bottles mimic how hamsters drink in the wild—by drinking drops of dew hanging from plants. When you fill the water bottle each day, run your finger over the tip of the sipping tube to make sure that water is coming out and it is working. If not, it is time to purchase a new bottle. You should provide fresh, cold water daily.

Food Dish: Provide your hamster with a small ceramic food dish. Make sure your hamster can reach the bottom of her bowl.

Mineral and salt licks: ****We do not recommend mineral and salt licks**** because there is a danger that too much can cause dehydration.

Exercise Ball: ****We do not recommend exercise balls.**** Hamsters have poor eyesight and tend to crash into things when they are in them. There is little ventilation, and you can only leave them in the balls for 15 minutes or fewer at a time. That's not enough time for enough exercise and playtime out of the cage to keep your hamster healthy and happy. Also, stairs and larger animals such as dogs and cats are hazards to the hamster in the ball.

Exercise Wheels: Many pet stores sell wire exercise wheels that are inappropriate for hamsters. Some are even sold as part of a cage. The wheel should be made from one solid plastic piece. It should not have metal or plastic rungs that can cause the hamster to fall through and become stuck. There is no way for

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you to monitor your hamster constantly and he may become stuck in his wheel for hours overnight unbeknownst to you. He could break his legs or injure them to the point that they require amputation.

An excellent exercise wheel is the Large Comfort Wheel sold online at www.theferretstore.com. Another good wheel is the Wodent Wheel, which in our experience is much quieter than the Comfort Wheel. It is available at www.petdiscounters.com. Either of these wheels are fine for Syrian hamsters, who need a minimum 8-inch diameter wheel so they can fit inside comfortably.

Dwarf hamsters can use the small Comfort Wheel. They can also use the Silent Spinner wheel, which attaches to the side of the cage or can be stood upright. Like the Wodent Wheel, it's much quieter than the Comfort wheel. However, it's too small for Syrian hamsters, so it should be used for dwarf hammies only.

Sleeping House: Your hamster will divide his cage into eating, sleeping, and bathroom areas. Where he sleeps he may make a nest out of his bedding by building the bedding up into a ring and sleeping in the middle. Your hamster would like a little something to go over his head when he is sleeping. A variety of nesting boxes are available at pet stores. You can also make your own by cutting a door out of an old tissue box. The best hideways give the hamster an accessible door opening and plenty of privacy.

Nesting Material: Your hamster would also like some material other than his bedding to build his nest. Toilet paper is a popular choice. It must be undyed and unscented. Seventh Generation toilet paper is safe and sold at Giant Eagle. Do not buy the fluffy bedding material sold in pet stores, and do not use tissues or toilet paper. These can block hamsters' stomachs causing death or wrap around their limbs resulting in lost circulation and amputation. Place the nesting material inside your hamster's sleeping house.

Chewing: Place a toilet paper tube or paper towel tube in your hamster's cage. They will nibble on it and tunnel through it. Keeping your hamsters "in cardboard" will satisfy their chewing instincts and help keep their teeth trim. Do not buy dyed wood cheweys sold at pet stores. Cheweys should be as natural as possible. Once your hamster has chewed on it for awhile, the wood could develop splinters and should be removed at this time. Cheweys can be soaked in juice to encourage your pet to nibble on them.

Sand Bath: A sand bath can be provided by placing a suitable sized dish in the cage filled with fine chinchilla sand. Ceramic or metal dishes which are not easily tipped are best used. Hamsters, particularly dwarf hamsters, appreciate having a dish of sand to roll in, and this helps to remove the greasiness from the coat.

Toys: Hamsters are active, playful animals. However, they can do much more than just run in their wheels and should be given the opportunity to do so! Without regular exercise their spines can deteriorate and they can become paralyzed. There are lots of examples of toys that will contribute to your hamster's happiness on-line, many of which can be easily and inexpensively made.

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EXERCISE AND PLAY

Rubbermaid Playpen: A better option than the exercise ball is to make a playpen out of a Rubbermaid tub. Go to the Rubbermaid section of a department store such as Walmart and look for the \$6 SnapTopper tub. It is 23.7 inches by 15.8 inches by 12.2 inches. Larger ones can also be used (in fact, the bigger, the better!). Buy only the tubs that are clear or translucent so your hamster does not feel confined.

Put down a layer of bedding and toys such as tubes and building blocks. Hide treats throughout the playpen. You can even transfer your hamster's food dish to the playpen and you should provide a small dish of water. The playpen is a great way to break the boredom of the cage where the hamster spends all of her time. Toys can be rotated to make life interesting. The advantages of the playpen are that it is lightweight, easy to clean, and easy to move around. It is fun for your hamster and expands her environment beyond her cage, and if you frequently change it around, she will always have something new and interesting to explore.

It is not recommended that you purchase the collapsible wire playpens available at pet stores. Hamsters are intelligent and quickly find their way out of these simply by climbing up the sides.

HANDLING

Hamsters navigate through their world relying on their senses of smell and hearing. During your first few days together, your hamster will have to become acquainted with your voice and scent. Speak softly when you approach her. Keep your interactions to a minimum at first. She needs to adjust to her new house.

When you feel your hamster is ready, gently reach into her cage, inviting her to come over and sniff your skin. Make sure you have washed your hands first. Otherwise your hamster might mistake you for lunch! It is best to approach her in the evening when she is starting to wake up.

If your hamster rolls on her back, bares her teeth, runs away, or squeals, she is feeling threatened. Because in their natural desert habitat they are prey animals, hamsters do not bite unless they feel frightened. Leave her alone for awhile.

But if she approaches you, wrap your fingers gently but firmly around her and lift her up. You can also turn over a plastic igloo, coax her to walk into it, and then lift the igloo out of the cage.

Your hamster will want to walk from hand to hand. Hold your hamster gently between your palm and thumb. Turn the palm of your other hand face up and allow her to step there. Continue to alternate your hands, placing one in front of the other.

On those occasions when it is necessary to wake your hamster, do not startle her or she will become

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defensive. Instead, tap your finger on the side of her cage or make a little noise until she wakes on her own. Let her sniff your hand so she realizes you are there. Talk to her and stroke her a few times gently, until she gets up and walks around. Only then should you slowly and gently pick her up. The hamster's personality is often misunderstood—they are frequently labeled as mean and ornery. In most instances, the hamster who live up to those labels is simply a hamster that has been mistreated or was never socialized to human handling. The well-bred, well-socialized hamster that is properly housed, entertained, and cared for should be a gentle, sweet-natured animal that comes to know and trust her owner and to enjoy the time they spend together. The bond that can form between a hamster and a human can be surprisingly sound and touching!

ROUTINE CARE

In this section, we'll examine what you need to do to care for your hamsters on a regular basis. The information in this section refers to feeding guidelines for Syrian hamsters. Because dwarf hamsters are susceptible to diabetes, their feeding guidelines are different and are contained in the diabetes sheet given to prospective dwarf hamster guardians.

FEEDING

Purchase a quality food. It should be as natural as possible. (It should not have purple and hot pink colored bits in it.) We recommend Supreme Hazel Hamster food for nutrition and variety. It is available at PetSmart. You can also order a 1, 3, or 6 bag supply online at www.petfooddirect.com. Many hamster foods on the market promise that they are nutritious, healthy, and chock full of vitamins and minerals. However, many of these same foods are high in fatty seed content and also contain sugar and molasses, in addition to the controversial, cancer-causing preservative ethoxyquin. Among the brands to avoid are Nutriphase, Kaytee Forti-Diet, Kaytee Exact Rainbow Food, and Vitakraft.

Store the unused food in an airtight Tupperware container so it does not become moldy or stale. Food that is not fresh can make your hamster sick. It is not necessary to keep the food in the refrigerator.

Give your hamster fresh food every day. Dump out any uneaten food and refill the bowl. The best time to feed your hamster is the early evening, when she'd naturally be looking for food.

Hamsters need and enjoy fruits and vegetables. A great place to offer fruits and vegetables is in his playpen (see toys section above). You do not want your hamster to hoard fresh food in his house. It can spoil. If they eat spoiled food, it can make them sick. Remove leftovers immediately.

As with humans, dark green, leafy vegetables are nutritionally best. Vegetables that are suitable to feed your hamster are as follows:

Alfalfa
Apple
Asparagus

Kiwi
Mango
Melon

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Avocado, skinned and seedless
Banana
Basil
Black berries
Blueberries
Broccoli
Carrots
Cauliflower leaves and stalks
Celery
Cherries without stones
Chestnuts
Cilantro
Cranberries
Cucumber
Grapes
Green beans
Kale

Mint
Okra
Orange
Papaya
Parsley
Peach
Peas
Plums without stones
Raspberries
Spinach
Squash
Strawberries
Sweet peppers (green, red, orange, yellow, purple)
Twigs from fruit trees that have not been sprayed with pesticides

DO NOT FEED: Foods that are poisonous to hamsters are as follows:

Onion
Potatoes
Raw beans
Rhubarb
Green part of tomatoes
Leaves from tomatoes

IN SMALL AMOUNTS: The following foods can cause liver problems and should only be fed occasionally in small amounts:

Cabbage
Kale
Lettuce

SPECIAL TREATS: From time to time, about once every week or two weeks, your hamster will appreciate a special treat in his food bowl. Suitable treats are:

Rolled oats
Dry miniature corn cobs
Cheese or unsalted, unroasted nuts in small quantities
Whole grains: whole wheat bread; cooked brown rice or whole wheat pasta
Tofu
Nonsugar cereals (such as Kashi)

HEALTH

As discussed in the section on handling, your hamster needs exercise each and every day. A good time to

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check your hamster over for health problems is when you bring her out every day. Look for listlessness, runny eyes or nose, sneezing, wheezing, rattling, thin condition, ruffled stand-up coat, hunched posture, diarrhea, bloated belly, cuts, open wounds, and growths. Scruff your hammy and check her teeth to make sure they have not become chipped or fallen out (common in older hamsters especially). A healthy hamster will be curious and active, have a sleek, glossy coat, and be in good body weight. If your hamster should develop medical problems it is your responsibility as her guardian to take her to the vet—just as you would your child.

A healthy hamster has bright, shiny eyes, a thick, silky coat, a clean tail and rear end, and a dry nose. She will be lively and alert. On rare occasions, hamsters can catch an illness from humans. Do not handle your hamster if you have a cold.

Signs that your hamster is sick:

| | |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|
| lack of energy | excessive scratching |
| overgrown teeth | dirty, wet fur around the tail |
| bald spot | swollen, red patches of skin |
| overgrown claws | runny nose red or runny eyes |
| weight loss | loss of appetite |
| avoidance of light | swollen cheeks |
| runny stool (poop) | |

As soon as you notice any signs of illness, take your hamster to a vet. Because small animals are prey in the wild, they have an instinct to mask signs of illness. Once you've noticed they're ill, the disease could already be far progressed, and because they're such tiny, vulnerable creatures, it's imperative to get them to a vet right away.

A prevalent disease in the hamster population is the condition known as wet tail, *proliferative ileitis*. Wet tail is a bacterial illness causing severe diarrhea and even death. Signs are watery diarrhea and moisture around the tail, loss of appetite, dehydration, unkempt hair, rectal bleeding or rectal prolapse, and uncharacteristic irritability. Stress, sudden change in diet, overcrowding, extreme temperatures, and unsanitary living conditions are among the factors contributing to wet tail. A hamster showing signs of wet tail should be taken to the vet at the earliest sign. Only the vet should direct treatment.

For more information on common illnesses, visit <http://www.hamsterific.com/illnessGuide.cfm>.

We welcome questions! Please email hamsters@smallangelsrescue.org. You can see our adoptable animals online at <http://www.smallangels.petfinder.com>.

List of Recommended Supplies

Suitable Housing: At least 24 inches long, 18 inches wide, 16 inches high; secure, well-ventilated.

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We recommend the All Living Things 24-inch wire cage (sold through Small Angels) or the My First Home for Rats. Aquariums must be at least 20 gallons.

Bedding: We recommend Carefresh Bedding. Unscented Aspen is acceptable. No Cedar, pine, chlorophyll, sawdust or cat litter.

Water Bottle: Four ounce minimum. Do not use a water dish.

Water Bottle Holder: for aquariums

Small Food Bowl: We recommend ceramic.

Quality Food: We recommend Supreme Hazel Hamster Food. Available at Petsmart and online at <http://www.petfooddirect.com/>. Hartz, Nutriphase, and Kaytee not recommended.

Tupperware Container: To store unused food to prevent spoilage.

Nesting Box: Hide-away, Igloo, Small Box...

Nesting Material: We recommend unscented toilet paper. Do not buy the commercial "fluff."

Exercise Wheel: It must be solid - NO rungs. Syrian hamsters need a minimum 8-inch wheel, such as the Wodent Wheel or Comfort Wheel (the Silent Spinner is too small). Dwarf hamsters can use the Silent Spinner.

Rubbermaid Tub Playpen: Inexpensive large tubs are available at Walmart, Target etc.

Toys: Tunnels, Tubes, Items to Explore...

Carrier: Medium wire small animal carrier recommended

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Remember, we **DO NOT** recommend **EXERCISE BALLS** or **SALT LICKS/WHEELS!**