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## Small Rodent Care

### Hamster

#### Diet

**Water** should be provided through a valve-less sipper tube as hamsters are not able to apply strong suction, so they sometimes find it difficult to suck water from a traditional "ball-valve" sipper tube. Check the water bottle daily for leaks and/or blockages and change your hamster's water at least once a day. You should also regularly clean the bottle and nozzle properly to avoid contamination.

**Food** needs to be of good quality and balanced. Hamsters LOVE to hoard food in a private larder, often in their nest box. They carry it from their bowl to their nest in their cheek pouches and can often be seen with bulging cheeks.

You can provide either commercial hamster foods, which are specially formulated to provide all the necessary nutrients and minerals your hamster needs to stay happy and healthy, or you can provide a mixture of different seeds, grains, nuts, washed fruit and vegetables.



Food is best served directly on the cage floor or in a flat dish. Scattering the food on the cage floor will give your hamster something to do and encourages natural food-gathering behaviour.

Don't suddenly change your hamster's diet or allow food to become stale as this can lead to stomach upsets. For variety, you can offer small quantities of fruit such as apples, but remove them if they are not eaten and become soiled or go brown. **REMEMBER, grapes and rhubarb can be poisonous to hamsters.**

#### Housing and Behaviour

Your hamster will rest and sleep during the day but at night they will be very active so make sure they have plenty of space to play during the night time. A good quality running wheel can provide extra opportunities for exercise but your hamster must always have lots of other things to play with too! A boring environment, stress, frustration and a lack of mental stimulation can lead to a hamster developing repetitive behaviours such as running in circles or gnawing the bars of their cage for long periods of time. Get the largest running "disc" you can so your hamster's feet or legs cannot get trapped and injured, with a non-slip running surface.



In the wild, hamsters are extremely good diggers and construct deep, dark underground burrows so provide your hamster with a thick layer of litter/bedding so they can dig and burrow.

Hamsters enjoy exploring so you should provide opportunities to spend time out of their cage once you can handle them with confidence. Hamsters are a prey animal and can be nervous of new sights, sounds and smells. It's important that you keep them safe from other pets such as a cat or dog, and never leave them unattended.

## Company

Hamsters are generally solitary animals and can be aggressive towards other animals, sometimes resulting in serious injury or even death. Syrian and Chinese hamsters in particular are not naturally sociable and are better kept on their own.

Dwarf hamsters are more sociable than other species of hamster but fighting can still occur. Provide multiple shelters in the cage so that each hamster can hide away from the other if they need to. If fighting does occur, it is likely to happen in the night when your hamster is most active so always check them in the morning to make sure that none have been badly injured and need veterinary treatment.

With care, some species, such as the Russian Dwarf, can be housed in pairs or trios as long as the group is formed early in life and no new animals are added. Groups should ideally be young litter mates which will help to reduce the risk of aggression. Don't forget, keep hamsters in same sex pairs to avoid reproduction.

## Health & Welfare

A hamster can become unwell and go downhill very quickly but may only show very subtle signs of being in pain or distress when they can, in fact, be suffering severely. It's important to keep a regular check that your hamster is behaving normally, moving around, breathing well and that they have bright eyes and a shiny coat.

When handling your hamster, run your fingers gently over their body, checking for lumps and bumps and to check that they are a good body weight. If you notice that you can feel your hamster's bones more than you could before, it might mean that they have gone off their food.

Hamsters can become infected by contaminated food, water or litter material. You should also make sure your hamster isn't being disturbed too much by young children, other pets or by people waking them up when they should be asleep.



If your hamster has a long coat, make sure it is kept clean and un-matted by regular combing and brushing. Your hamster may also begin to hibernate in winter. If this happens, make sure there is always fresh food and water available for when they wake up.

If you have any concerns about your hamster, please do seek advice from your vet. Using medicines that have not been prescribed by a vet can be very dangerous to hamsters. Signs that something is wrong may include:

- not eating or drinking.
- sitting in a hunched position.
- drinking lots of water.
- discharge from nostrils, eyes, vagina etc.
- wet faeces and/or diarrhoea.
- firm, warm and swollen stomach.
- any injuries or abnormal lumps.

Your hamsters teeth will grow continually throughout their lives so they need to gnaw objects to keep their teeth sharp and regularly worn down. If their teeth become overgrown, they need to be taken to the vet.

