

GINGER'S GUIDE

How to Care for Syrian Hamsters



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Overview

Syrian hamsters, sometimes called “teddy bear hamsters” or “golden hamsters,” are a common small animal found in almost all pet stores. Despite being a staple childhood pet, it can be hard to find a complete care guide for hamsters that contains accurate and comprehensive care instructions. This guide attempts to provide a majority of the necessary information for Syrian hamster care in one place for new hamster owners and current hamster owners looking to learn more. If you’re a minor, show this to your parents to make sure they’re well informed as well.

For those unfamiliar with small animal care, some of the requirements below may seem frivolous or unnecessary but are the current standard for care among ethical hamster breeders and exotic/pocket pet veterinarians who have ample experience and expertise in hamster care and a keen eye for health and behavioral problems. These minimum requirements are not suggestions that can be negotiated as they are the barest of bare minimum standards in what a Syrian hamster needs.

If the information here conflicts with what you’ve been told at the pet store, please refer to the information in this guide instead. Pet store employees are not officially trained in how to care for many of the pets they sell or provide supplies for and are often told to push items or products that can be extremely harmful for hamsters, such as certain store-sponsored cages or accessories.

These guidelines help keep a pet Syrian hamster happy and stress-free, which results in a pet that is less likely to bite, more likely to enjoy being around you and interacting with you, and live a longer, healthier life.

Quick Start Setup

Using a term I've borrowed from video games, I've composed a "quick start" setup for those that aren't sure where to start or are easily overwhelmed by new information and an abundance of choices.

The setup below meets the basic requirements for a happy, healthy hamster environment and requires the least amount of "do it yourself," or DIY, work. All items below should be available at your local pet store.

- 40 Gallon Breeder Tank
- 12-inch Kaytee Silent Spinner
- Kaytee Forti-Diet Pro Health Mouse, Rat and Hamster Food
- Higgin's Sunburst Hamster Mix
- Water Bottle with Tank Attachment and/or Water Bowl
- Wooden Bendy Bridges
- Non-Scented Paper Bedding

Habitat

Cage

Syrian hamsters need a lot of space to simulate the multitude of miles they'd run in search of food in the fields of their native home of Syria. The absolute minimum is 450 square inches of uninterrupted floor space, meaning that you cannot link up several smaller cages to achieve this. Ideal cage space is 600 square inches or more. If your hamster frequently attempts to escape the cage or looks like they're trying to climb the walls often, it's a sign that they need even more space. Some female hamsters may need up to 1000 square inches or more of floor space to satisfy their urge to explore and to collect food and material.

Because most cages marketed towards hamsters don't achieve this space, owners either have to purchase large fish tanks or reptile terrariums or make their own.

Recommended cages:

- Prevue 528 (608 sq in)
- 40 Gallon Breeder Tank (648 sq in)
- 75 Gallon Tank (864 sq in)
- Ikea Detolf (950 sq in)
- Ikea Samla Bin
- 50 Gallon Sterilite Stacker DIY Bin Cage (≈600 sq in)
- Iris Tree Bin

Don't place your hamster's cage in front of any windows and avoid placing them anywhere with a draft to keep the temperature around their cage constant to avoid overheating or hypothermia.

Important! Syrian hamsters must be housed alone. They are solitary creatures with known territorial behaviors that result in lethal fights between hamsters when housed together. The only exception is for mother hamsters and their pups, and even then, it is only until their territorial instincts develop.

Furnishing

Habitats should provide plenty of places for the hamster to hide, burrow under and chew. Hamsters feel more comfortable and safe in an area where they can easily hide, and other furnishings provide stimulation and the ability to explore and play. Hides are meant to let them *hide*, so it's better to avoid see-through or translucent hides and houses.

Recommended furnishings:

- Bendy bridges
- Houses
- Wide tunnels (not toilet or paper towel rolls)
- Popsicle stick constructs
- Natural cork bark rounds and flats, cleaned and sterilized
- Ovo tubes
- Appropriately sized PVC and ABS tubing

Chews

Hamsters have teeth that continually grow, so it's important to provide them with chews to help them keep their teeth at a healthy length. Hamsters without access to chews may develop long teeth that make it difficult for them to chew anything, including food. They have a natural instinct to chew in order to file down their teeth and will resort to chewing hides, houses and wheels if the cage has them unless more attractive and stimulating chews have been provided.

Provide hamsters with chews such as:

- Toilet paper rolls
- Whimzee dog chews
- Hanging treats
- Shelled nuts

Note: A hamster that is chewing on bars cannot be dissuaded from chewing on bars by providing more chews since bar biting is a behavior born from stress

and boredom. To stop bar biting, you must solve the underlying problem, such as a cage being too small or not having enough stimulation.

Wheel

Hamsters love their wheels, but they especially love properly sized ones. Six-inch wheels are too small for all Syrian hamsters, and it is better to provide a larger wheel for the hamster to grow into than a smaller wheel to grow out of. Small wheels cause hamsters to run with their back curved, which causes spinal issues and pain.

Syrians hamsters should have a 10 to 12-inch wheel. The metric of which size you should use is if your hamster is able to run with their back straight as some hamsters can be smaller or larger than average.

Recommended wheels:

- 10.5" Carolina Storm Wheel
- 11" Wodent wheel
- 11" Treadmill Wheel
- 12" Silent Runner Wheel
- DIY Bucket Wheel

Important! Wire wheels should never be used under any circumstance as they cause a condition called bumblefoot, which is caused by the wheel causing mini lacerations on the foot pads where bacteria can enter and cause the infection and inflammation. Untreated infections can result in necrosis, limb amputation, and even death. As well, a foot can get caught between the wires and hurt or break their legs. Fur can get caught in any part of it and get pulled off, taking skin with it.

Bedding

Along with space to run, hamsters need to simulate digging and tunneling on their own to satisfy their urge to burrow underground. Plastic tubes cannot be used to substitute natural burrowing. You need at least 4 to 6 inches of bedding. Don't worry if you see your hamster push most of their bedding to one corner,

leaving other sides thin on bedding. This is nest-building behavior. You can add a little more to the thinned areas so they aren't walking on the base of the cage.

To prevent or remove the smell of ammonia from your hamster's habitat, train your hamster to use a litter dish or simply find their pee corner and clean it out, replacing it with clean litter. See the section on sand and the chapter on litter for more information.

Paper and Aspen

While it may be tempting to buy scented bedding to avoid any unpleasant smells, hamsters have sensitive respiratory systems, and it can cause inflammation on their skin. Dust-free aspen shavings are fine, but pine and cedar bedding contain harmful chemicals that are dangerous for your hamster's lung health.

You can mix and match any of these beddings. It is recommended that if you use aspen that you mix it with paper bedding, as unmixed aspen is very difficult for hamsters to burrow in. Monitor your hamster when using aspen for the first time as it's common for hamsters to have some sensitivity to it, causing respiratory issues and hair loss on their abdomen.

- Kaytee Clean & Cozy Small Pet Bedding
- Carefresh Small Pet Bedding
- All Living Things Small Pet Bedding
- So Phresh Natural Aspen Small Animal Bedding
- Coco peat or coconut fiber
- Hemp or flax bedding

Sand

Sand baths simulate portions of the Syrian hamster's natural habitat. They use sand to clean themselves, and digging in the sand provides a source of stimulation and entertainment. It also can function as their litter if they're

trained. Unlike chinchillas and other large rodents that use sand baths, sand baths for Syrian hamsters can be left in the cage as part of their habitat. Do not use chinchilla bath dust or sand.

Clean your sand bath as needed to allow for your hamster to use it for both functions.

Find a container to be the sand bath around five inches in diameter. You can use large, flat-bottom bowls, ceramic containers, large glass containers, or whatever else you can find that works for your hamster and fits in their habitat. Some hamsters enjoy kicking their sand out of the container, so it may be handy to use a deep container and place a bendy bridge into it to allow for easy access to get in and outside of the container.

Known safe sands:

- Generic child-safe, outdoor play sand, washed and sanitized
- Zoo Med Repti Sand, natural white
- CaribSea Super Naturals aquarium sand
- Crayola Play Sand

Sanitizing Sand

As many pet sand options are not safe for hamsters and their sensitive respiratory systems, you may want to use regular child-safe play sand, containing no chemicals, toxic dyes or added “effects.” Check the package of the sand to see if it has been heat-treated, also called “sanitized.” If it says it has been sanitized and the sand on the inside of the package is completely dry, you won’t need to sanitize it yourself.

Otherwise, you will need to sanitize it yourself by placing some sand in a baking sheet or other oven-safe dish at 350 F (176 C) for as long as it takes for the sand to dry, waiting for it to cool and placing into a container to use for later. If desired, you can use a sieve to sift out larger particles after you’ve sanitized the sand and before you store it.

Note: Dusty sand is a common problem when buying generic play sand. This is fixed by washing the sand, draining the water and then sanitizing it.

Escaped Hamster

Even in large enclosures, your hamster might escape, whether it's because you forgot to close the cage or the hamster chewed a hole in the corner of a bin cage.

1. Close doors & temporarily seclude any other pets, such as putting cats in carriers or in a separate room with the door closed.
 - a. Put a towel under doors as hamsters can squeeze their way under doors
2. Check areas that a hamster would feel safe in, like under the couch, in the corner of a closet, etc.
3. Place their wheel out in the area you think they're in and check it periodically.
4. Set up a bucket trap by finding a large enough bucket your hamster could not escape from on their own, place their favorite food inside the bucket, then add a ramp to allow the hamster to reach the edge of the bucket. With any luck, they will jump inside the bucket but be unable to leave it.
5. Consider purchasing a humane live trap to help catch your hamster.
6. If you have a female and male hamster in the same household, check around the other's cage.
7. Place a box or carrier with their bedding and some food with easy access to get inside by themselves. In an unfamiliar environment, they may bed down in bedding that smells familiar with easy access to food and water.
8. Dust the floor with a light coating of flour if you have hardwood or laminate floors. This can help to see if your hamster passed through the area.

Food

Dry Food

Syrian hamsters are omnivores and require a higher protein diet than other small pets. You cannot use hay or high fiber seed mixes as their main source of food. For this reason, it is not recommended to use Oxbow's hamster food.

Ideal food makeup indicated on the nutrition labels (also called the “guaranteed analysis”) should be as close to the following numbers as possible. For younger hamsters, aim for the higher amount of protein as it supports healthy growth. For hamsters older than one year of age, aim for the lower amount of protein. For more information on older hamsters, see the chapter on elderly care.

- 18 - 23% protein
- 4 - 10% fat
- 8 - 15% fiber

Blocks should be the base of their diet, supplemented with a quality seed mix a couple times a week. You can find Teklad Blocks for sale at [Wee Companions' website](#) or using Amazon.

- Envigo Teklad Blocks 8640, for younger hamsters
- Envigo Teklad Blocks 2018, for older hamsters
- Mazuri Rat Blocks
- Higgin's Sunburst Hamster Mix

If you're unable to secure the examples above, use [The Hamingway's hamster food database](#) to search for appropriate hamster food using the numbers above.

Fresh Food

Additionally, you'll want to supplement the dry food with fresh fruits and vegetables along with the occasional high protein snack. Including, but not limited to:

Kale	Spinach	Broccoli	Avocado
Pumpkin	Peas	Watermelon	Strawberries
Bananas	Hard-boiled or scrambled eggs	Cooked chicken or turkey	Mealworms, store-bought

For the full list, see the [Ontario Hamster Club's page](#).

Treats

Not all treats come in the form of fresh or dried food. Syrian hamsters also have what is called the “pre-gastric pouch” that can digest lactose, so hamsters can enjoy dairy treats at all stages of their lives.

Some unconventional treats that hamsters love are:

- Grandma Lucy's Organic Oven-Baked Dog Treats
- Whimzee Dental Chews
- Gerber Puffs
- Cheese & Yogurt
- Love Child Organics Love Ducks

Food to Avoid

Like all animals, there are also some foods you must avoid for their general health as some can be fatal:

- Tomato leaves
- Blue cheese or other soft/moldy cheeses
- Apple seeds
- Uncooked or raw beans
- Raw potatoes
- Eggplant/aubergine

- Rhubarb leaves
- Prepackaged deli meats
- Chili pepper

Mush

In some cases, such as older hamsters with brittle teeth or for hamsters with health conditions that affect their teeth (such as hydrocephalus), it is recommended to make a mush using their lab blocks. The ethical breeders at [Cheeks and Squeaks](#) use a recipe they call [Wendell's Wonder Food](#). They also provide a list of [safe baby food for hamsters](#) to use in the recipe but can also be used on their own to supplement lab blocks.

Ingredients

- 1 Tablespoon Chia
- 6 Tablespoons water
- 4 oz container of high calorie baby food
- 10 pumps Vitaglow
- 1 Tablespoon coconut oil
- 1 scoop Esbilac powder
- 1 Tablespoon brewer's Yeast
- 2/3 cup block powder

Directions

1. Bring water to a boil. Measure out chia in a heatproof, medium-sized mixing bowl. Pour boiling water over chia, stir. Let soak for 5 minutes, stir again.
2. Add baby food, Vitaglow, and coconut oil to chia. Mix to combine.
3. Add Esbilac powder and brewer's yeast to bowl. Mix until homogeneous.
4. Slowly add block powder, a few spoonfuls at a time. Mix in between each addition. When finished, mixture should resemble a cookie dough consistency.
5. Keep refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 5 days.

Cage Cleaning

With a proper cage size (minimum 450 square inches), you don't need to change the bedding out every week. Instead, you can deep clean (removing all the bedding) once a month and spot clean until then.

Spot Cleaning

Spot cleaning entails cleaning their litter or pee corner, removing any soiled bedding, removing poop, and cleaning their nest of poop. This may include a once a week cleaning of their nest.

Avoid spot cleaning their nest too often as it may stress them out, but removing the poop and soiled bedding from their nest is necessary.

Deep Cleaning

Even with spot cleaning, you'll still need to do a deep clean once every four to six weeks where you remove almost all the bedding and wipe away the cage to catch the dust. Hamsters have a sensitive respiratory system so making sure the cage is clear of dust is very important to their health.

Preserve approximately 20-25% of unsoiled bedding to distribute across the cage and place where they typically nest. This allows the cage to still smell like home for your hamster and helps avoid stress with each deep clean.

Note: Cages that are large enough and spot cleaned effectively can go many months without a deep clean. Frequent deep cleaning causes stress to your hamster so it is recommended to minimize it if possible.

Cleaning Supplies

If you need to remove built up sediments or lingering smells, use a diluted white vinegar, chlorhexidine, or F10 to clean a cage once all the bedding is removed.

If a hamster died of some contagious disease or parasite, you'll need to clean the cage more thoroughly before using it for another hamster. Clean the cage using a diluted bleach solution of 10% bleach. Spray on the cage and let it soak for 10 minutes, then wipe with warm, soapy water. Do not put a hamster in this cage for a minimum of 24 hours.

Water

Water Bottle

Water bottles should have their contents changed out everyday or every other day to prevent bacterial buildup. To avoid any sediment growth, scrub the inside of the water bottle at least once a week. Then fill the water bottle with regular water. Check water bottles at least once a day to ensure they work and that your hamster is able to drink water from the bottle.

Water Bowl

Water bowls are also an option for owners, but these have to be cleaned more often than bottles as they're completely open to dust, bedding, and the hamsters themselves. To avoid some bedding or other debris from landing in the water, place it on an elevated platform in the cage. Change the water and clear the bowl once a day.

Litter Training

Hamsters can be potty trained as they naturally will pick one corner to pee in and stick with that.

Buy a litter dish that is fit for their size (see earlier section on sand) and fill it with appropriate sand, granule bedding, or paper bedding. If your hamster picks a new corner that is not the corner you placed the dish, put the soiled bedding in the litter dish.

Empty the litter dish once the chosen litter is mostly or completely soiled, clean the dish and refill it with new litter.

Warning! Do not use litter meant for other animals, such as cats, especially litter that is meant to clump together when peed in. Chinchilla bath dust is too fine for a Syrian hamster's extremely sensitive respiratory system and should be avoided completely.

Taming

When you take your hamster home for the first time, they will be nervous and a little scared of the new environment, new smells, and new people. Syrian hamsters have very poor eyesight and rely on their sense of smell to identify people, things, and environments. For hamsters unfamiliar with human touch, letting them adjust for one day in their new environment can be helpful.

Note: Hamsters adopted from ethical breeders are already tamed, which means that they are friendly to human touch and not likely to bite when approached or handled correctly. Do not give an already tamed hamster an adjustment period in which you do not handle them for a day or more, as their tameness can regress.

Put your hand in their cage and allow them to get used to it. You can place a few treats in your hand to get them closer to you, but do not grab them when they're not yet tame as it can result in biting and prolonging the taming process. It may take a few days before your hamster is comfortable getting close to your hand, but once they are, you can use a treat to lure them into standing in your hand. Once they're comfortable with that, you can slowly introduce lifting them from their cage to take them out.

Additionally, place your scent in their habitat by taking some toilet paper or non-scented tissue paper and rubbing it on yourself. This works best as they can use it to build their nest and interact with your scent safely in a way that stimulates them.

Gloves

If you're nervous about being bit or have been bit in the past, try using clean, thick fabric or leather gloves. Gloves can also make you more confident as you attempt to tame them. If you're constantly jerking away your hand in fear or being bit, a protective glove can make you feel safer about interacting together.

Handling

Note: Always wash your hands before and after you handle your hamster.

Young and untamed hamsters are more likely to jump from your hands. If you need to remove them from their cage for a deep cage clean, place their carrier or a small box in their cage. Place the hamster in it or wait for them to enter on their own and close the carrier or box. If you cannot or do not want to close a box, place the box somewhere your hamster can't escape, such as placing the box in a bathtub.

Cuddle Pouches

Even when your hamster is tamed, they might be a little too excited or get scared at a new sound. Ideally, buying or crafting a “cuddle sack” or “cuddle pouch” from a heavy, double layered material is a great way to take them from room to room without fear of dropping them. Otherwise, hold them with two hands and close to your chest when you take them from their cage to play with them elsewhere.

Free Roaming

Allowing your hamster to explore a safe area uninhibited is a great way to give your hamster most stimulation outside of their cage as well as a chance to play with your hamster. Letting them run around on your bed, in a hamster-proof room, or in a play pen with supervision can be a great way to bond with your pet and satisfy their urge to explore a larger environment.

Exercise Balls

The iconic hamster ball is not to be used due to poor ventilation and the risk of injury from the ball itself, as limbs and nails can get caught on the ventilation holes available. As Syrian hamsters have poor eyesight, they cannot see the area they are supposedly exploring, which means that the ball isn't providing any more enrichment than the wheel inside the cage could.

Picking Up

When picking up your hamster, it's recommended you let them climb into your hands. Additionally, rather than plucking them out of their cage from above, you can pick them up by using both hands to scoop them up. Avoid chasing your hamster around the cage.

While it's okay to pick them up by their midsection with one hand, it may not foster a good relationship with your hamster to be plucked from their cage when they don't want to interact with people, so prioritize training them to walk on your hand to take them out when they're awake.

Young, non-social, or untamed hamsters may be difficult to pick up with the aforementioned methods. If you do pluck them up around their midsection, quickly turn your hand so they are resting on their back, supported by your hand so they aren't dangling from the grasp, or you promptly place them into a ready cuddle sack.

If you worry about being bitten or are otherwise nervous to pick them up, shoo them into a hide, container, or mug that you can pick up with.

Scruffing

Scruffing is the act of immobilizing your hamster by pulling back the scruff around the neck and shoulders with one hand and lifting them up so they're on their back, supported by the hand scruffing them so they're not dangling. This is done to keep your hamster still as you clip their nails, check their teeth, or otherwise inspect their body. While it may look uncomfortable for the hamster, they are not in pain so long as [the technique is performed correctly](#).

Behavior

Hamsters are omnivorous creatures of prey, so some of their behaviors may seem strange to people only used to the behaviors of cats and dogs.

Pouching

Hamsters have pockets in their cheeks called pouches that let them carry a lot of stuff from one place to another. In the wild, it would let them collect an array of seeds, berries and other foods found far from home and take it to their nest easily and efficiently. Hamsters will also use their cheeks to carry bedding.

Nesting

Prey creatures will build a warm nest to sleep in and hide their food. Plenty of bedding, hides, bendy bridges and other forms of cover give them options for where and how to build their nest. Nests are their safe place, so it's important to be careful when disturbing their nest. Make sure you know your hamster is out of their nest before you clean it as even a tame hamster will give a warning bite if you disturb the nest with them in it.

For hamsters that do not come out of their nest often during your waking hours, it's perfectly fine (and even recommended) that you dig or lure your hamster out of their nest to pick them up.

Burrowing

Often in conjunction with nesting, burrowing is the act of building tunnels or digging through their bedding to get from one place to another. Hamsters have a natural instinct to burrow and enjoy burrowing as deep as they can, which is why it's important to provide them with ample bedding to burrow in. Not all hamsters feel a strong urge or desire to burrow and may prefer to build nests in a hide over burrowing deep into bedding, but it's important to provide the bedding. They may prefer to burrow deep underneath their nest, or they may use the ample bedding to rearrange their habitat to their liking.

Chewing

Syrian hamsters' teeth continuously grow, so they need plenty of material and opportunities to chew. This includes shelled nuts, hamster-safe dog chews, chew blocks, toilet paper rolls and other cardboard, and so on. Additionally, providing them with chewing material helps keep them stimulated and entertained.

Vocalizations

Chirping

A soft or high pitched squeak is also known as a chirp! Hamsters can chirp for a variety of reasons, including being happy or excited. Female hamsters may also chirp when they're in heat.

Hissing

Most animals will hiss when they feel attacked or threatened, and Syrian hamsters are no exception. Most hissing will be accompanied by flipping onto their back or standing upright on their back paws while baring their teeth.

Teeth Grinding/Bruxing

Though it's not technically a vocalization, teeth grinding is still a method of auditory communication. Hamsters may grind their teeth together when they're frustrated or displeased, such as if they're being handled when they want to be left alone. Teeth grinding in their sleep or when they're visibly relaxed may be more of a tooth maintenance act than communication, akin to picking their teeth. Hamsters can also brux in contentment or enjoyment!

Health

Despite being a small animal, Syrian hamsters still need to go to the vet when you suspect there is a problem with their health. Hamsters from breeding mills are more likely to have genetic health problems, such as a higher risk of stroke or heart disease, which is also why it's important to adopt hamsters from ethical breeders that breed with health as their first concern.

Symptoms that are especially important to get checked by a veterinarian include:

- Lethargy/fatigue
- Sudden weight increase/decrease without cause
- Decreased appetite
- Masses/lumps
- Loss of fur
- Diarrhea
- Wheezing/sneezing
- Runny nose
- Hunched back
- Open sores
- Swelling

There are also health concerns that can result from the environment and diet that you can keep an eye out for and even prevent.

Diarrhea

Diarrhea in hamsters, easily diagnosed by loose, runny stool with wet fur around the posterior and tail. It's a myth that diarrhea can be caused by providing too many watery vegetables or fruits as hamsters are proficient in managing their water intake. Diarrhea is a very serious symptom caused by a variety of things like stress, bacteria, viruses, parasites, and sometimes even as a side effect to prescribed antibiotics. If you see blood in their diarrhea, take them to a veterinarian immediately.

Some minor diarrhea can be the result of an upset tummy that will pass, similar to when humans get stressed or eat something that doesn't agree with them. It should still be closely monitored, and if it shows no signs of improvement within 24 hours, you should schedule an appointment with your veterinarian and make sure your hamster is hydrated in the meantime.

Wet Tail

Wet Tail, also known as "Proliferative Ileitis", is a bacterial infection in the gut for young hamsters (three to six weeks of age, up to 12 weeks of age) after being weaned from the mother, with the main symptom being diarrhea. This has a 90% fatality rate. If you suspect your hamster has Wet Tail, take them to a veterinarian immediately.

Torpor

Though it looks similar to hibernation, torpor is a serious health concern for Syrian hamsters as it's a last ditch effort at survival. This can happen when the room is too cold and the likelihood increases if the hamster doesn't have enough food or water and feels the need to conserve energy and resources.

A hamster in torpor can appear deceased. Their heart rate and breath dramatically decrease but don't stop. Feel for breath, check for a heartbeat, and watch for movement. Check the feet for color, as a hamster in torpor will have pink feet while a deceased hamster's feet will begin to turn blue.

To bring a hamster out of torpor, increase room temperature back to normal ranges if it isn't already. Then hold them to use your body heat, a heat pad with a cover, or a warm, dry towel to wrap them in it, give them fluids, and monitor their progress.

Important! After you've brought your hamster out of torpor, make a vet appointment to assess the health of your pet. Make sure your hamster stays hydrated as it's key to survival after torpor.

Teeth

Color

Healthy hamster teeth are a golden yellow or orange color. There is no need to brush your hamster's teeth. If your hamster's teeth suddenly turn white, take them to the vet as it can be a result of trauma to the teeth and cause them to become brittle and prone to breakage.

Length

A hamster's teeth will never stop growing, so they need toys and chews for them to chew on to keep their teeth at a healthy length. If they do not have the ability to file down their teeth naturally, their teeth will continue to grow and curl backwards.

Once their teeth have grown to a length in which they cannot open their mouth enough for the tips of their teeth to touch, it becomes very hard for them to eat and makes it even harder for them to maintain their own teeth length. In extreme situations, their front teeth may perforate the roof of their mouth if they grow too long.

If your hamster's teeth are too long or are unable to grind them down by themselves, you will need the vet to maintain them. Do not attempt to fix this yourself!

Bar Burn

If a hamster is stressed or bored and the habitat includes wire bars, they may chew on the bars which can misalign the teeth and result in bar burn on the tops of their snouts where the wires rub against their fur while chewing. Bar biting can also result in breaking teeth.

Overheating

Syrian hamsters do best in temperatures of 65-75 F (20-22 C). Extreme heat can result in dehydration and heatstroke. Keep your hamster cool in the summer by making sure they always have enough water and consider moving them to a cooler portion of the house. You can also give them treats of frozen vegetables like frozen peas or chill some hamster-safe sand before placing it in their sand bath container.

Diabetes

Syrian hamsters aren't as prone to diabetes as dwarf hamsters are but it is still something to be proactive against. Diabetes in Syrian hamsters is onset due to weight, not sugar content. However, a hamster will maintain a healthy weight when given a good habitat that includes a properly sized wheel and adequate enrichment.

Note on Veterinarian Care

Syrian hamsters, despite being a staple pet of many childhoods, are not treated by regular veterinarians but by exotic or "pocket pet" veterinarians that tend to be more expensive. You should expect appointments to cost about \$90 USD, not including the cost of treatments or medications. It's important to have funding set aside for the vet before you adopt a hamster and to continue to contribute to that fund every month.

Elderly Care

Hamsters after one year of age are considered to be seniors though they may not show signs of aging until a year and a half. When they come closer to two years of age, they may find it harder to move around and climb so an adjustment in their cage setup may be necessary, such as moving their food or water to the main floor instead of requiring a climb to a second level.

Dietary Changes

Once a hamster begins to slow down in their old age, whether they're at one year of age, a year and a half or two years, it is recommended you switch them to a lower protein diet, such as the Harlan Teklan Blocks 2016 formula or Living World Extrusion food blocks. Reducing protein intake for senior hamsters helps prevent renal or kidney failure.

In older age, some may develop more brittle teeth and require a softer diet. For that, it is recommended that you supplement their diet with baby food and/or Wendell's Wonder Food recipe.

Personality Changes

You may notice a slight change in your hamster's personality. Some may become less social with their owners, instead preferring to hang out in their hides or nest. Others may become more docile and accepting of human interactions. There are cases in which they may become grouchy and more prone to bite or nip their owners. This is natural and not cause for concern.

Note: Sometimes sudden and aggressive biting, when hamster has not known to bite before, can be a sign the hamster is in pain.

Arthritis

Some hamsters may develop arthritis in their later life. If you are concerned about your hamster having arthritis, ask your vet about the supplement glucosamine.

Paliative/End of Life Care

If you are told by your vet that your hamster is close to the end of their lives or they are over two years old and you've noticed they've slowed down significantly, it is then you are welcome to spoil your hamster with all the treats they want.

F.A.Q.

You recommend breeders, but I thought all breeders were bad?

Animal mills and irresponsible breeders give breeding a bad name, but not all breeders breed for profit. Ethical breeders keep track of pedigrees, remove hamsters from breeding lines if it comes out they have health issues or problems, do not breed their females more than two or three times, etc. Their adoption fees are a fraction of what it takes to breed and raise their hamsters though they are more “expensive” than a mill bred pet store hamster.

You may see people insist you should never get a hamster from a breeder and that you should instead only rescue. While this can be good advice for cats and dogs, who often have oopsie litters that flood cat and dog rescues, the vast majority of rescue hamsters come from backyard breeders (irresponsible breeders that don’t breed for health first) and rodent mills that were sold for profit to owners that couldn’t care for them or didn’t know how to and who would eventually put them up to rehome or rescued by an outside source.

It’s important to support ethical breeders as the humane alternative to rodent mills and backyard breeders, as the eventual hope is that only ethical breeders and small animal rescues would be a source for hamster adoption.

Where can I find an ethical breeder near me?

Currently, there are only a handful in North America. Check the California Hamster Association’s (CHA) online list of ethical breeders in North America. If you have seen a hamster breeder online calling themselves ethical but they are not on the list, try emailing the CHA and asking if it is an oversight or if there’s a reason they were not included on the list as not all hamsteries that call themselves ethical breeders may follow all the rules ethical breeders are expected to follow. For Canadian-only information, check the Ontario Hamster Club’s list of registered breeders.

Which rescues have hamsters?

Any rescue could have hamsters! Unless they specifically say they're a pet-specific rescue, it's possible a hamster could be surrendered to them. Google your local rescues, check their websites, then call or email them if you can't find a good answer online. They may even know of a rescue in the area that does handle hamsters.

You can also check on Craigslist or other similar websites for people who are looking to rehome their hamster. These hamsters may not always come from a good home with the proper equipment. When rescuing a hamster, you should be extra aware of the fact they may have been neglected and/or abused, which may lead them to have a fear of hands, cage rage (an extreme territorial response, often seen in hamsters who have lived their lives in extremely tiny habitats). These hamsters need a good and loving home, if you're willing to handle a rescue hamster.

I got different care information at the pet store than what's on here. Which should I follow?

Please follow the information in this guide over what pet stores tell you. Unless you have found the hamster haven of pet stores, pet stores are not your friend or a trustworthy source of information. This includes both large chain pet stores and smaller locally owned pet stores. Pet store employees are not trained in all the various aspects of small animal care. They may be told to follow a script in order to sell items or are following a care guide developed by the company that is far below humane standards of care.

Why do pet stores have Syrian hamsters in the same display case together if they're solitary?

Baby Syrian hamsters don't develop their territorial instincts until about 6 to 8 weeks old, and it's good for their development to be with their siblings until they display their territorial instincts as they learn important hamster behavior skills from each other, similar to how puppies and kittens learn important social skills

by playing with their siblings. Once they graduate from play fighting to serious fighting and chasing, they need to be separated immediately to avoid injury and possible death.

My veterinarian recommended Oxbow and said they wouldn't recommend it if it wasn't important. Should I feed them Oxbow then?

Ask them what specifically about the Oxbow food is important to the health of your hamster and how it will fix the issue. For example, if they recommend Oxbow herbivore critical care because they need easily digestible food and fluids while they recover from an illness or procedure, use Wendell's Wonder Food recipe instead and add a little more water to the mixture in order to feed them using a feeding syringe. Oxbow's herbivore critical care might be the best thing a veterinarian can offer to help, but it is not the best option. Ask if they have Emeraid Omnivore instead.

If they're recommending Oxbow as the base of their diet, then ignore that advice. Oxbow does not meet the nutritional requirements that Syrian hamsters need and would be unhealthy for them to live on. There are a number of veterinarian clinics that have deals with Oxbow to use their products. Oxbow products are fantastic for many herbivorous small animals and rodents, such as rabbits and guinea pigs, but should not be recommended for hamsters.

You recommend some brand name items. Are you sponsored or getting paid by them to include these items?

Not at all! This care guide is a labor of love. I will not sell it nor accept any money to include items in it. The reason I include brand name items is to make it easier for people to find what they're looking for online, as some of the best stuff isn't carried in physical retail stores. If new information comes out that a product is no longer acceptable for Syrian hamsters, it will be taken off this care guide.

Is this a comprehensive care guide?

No. Though I've tried my best to provide most of the information of what Syrian hamsters need to be happy and healthy as pets, this is not comprehensive in all aspects of Syrian hamster care or health. I'm not a small animal/exotic/pocket pet veterinarian or an expert on Syrian hamsters. I love all hamsters, I love to learn, I love reading studies and journals and peer-reviewed articles, and I love to share what I learn. It also happens I have training in technical and professional writing, so I decided to put those skills to use in helping others help hamsters. Additionally, it's a way of saving me time from typing out the same information to a million different people.

About the Author

I got my first hamster at age 14, and I've had them for a decade since. The majority of them were from Petco and PetSmart. There was, unfortunately, a period in which they died rapidly in my care to which I found out it was the food I was giving them (the generic hamster seed mix from the bins at Winco), so I'm not entirely sure how many hamsters I've had. It might've also compounded with the fact they lived in what was likely a travel carrier, not a real cage. I don't remember when but I eventually switched to a bigger cage, a wire cage a little smaller than a 20-gallon tank. None of these hamsters lived anywhere close to two years of age.



I eventually decided to stop supporting mill bred hamsters in 2017 when I got my hamster, Nilla, from a local pet store that bred their own hamsters because I figured backyard breeding was better than a hamster from a rodent mill. Nilla didn't get the kind of care described in this document until the last month or two of her life when I finally had the funds and ability to get her a big enough cage and wheel. Unfortunately, Nilla suddenly passed away after having her for one year, but she was one of the sweetest hamsters I had so I went back to the same pet store and got my girl Spooky, who seemed to be somewhat related to Nilla, likely cousins of some sort. Spooky lived her best life with me for almost two years, with a proper wheel, cage, bedding, and food. She was my longest living hamster, a sweet girl who loved to sleep in my hands.

At the time of writing this, I care for two hamsters, Phoenix and Keyleth (who have separate cages) from a local ethical breeder. I recommend the experience of getting a hamster from an ethical breeder not just because the hamsters live longer due to healthier genetics and care from an earlier age, but because I get to know who their parents are, I get pictures from when they were babies, and I get to follow their siblings if their pet-parents post about them online. I even made a new friend because she has a hamster from the same litter as Phoenix.

My ability to provide a proper habitat for my hamsters was inhibited by the fact I was a minor without a source of income to be able to buy the things I needed for my pets, and my parents were under the impression we were already providing them with the proper care that needed no improvements. All of this is to say that I didn't know everything I needed to know when I started caring for Syrian hamsters, and that it's not a moral failing if you didn't give them the best care before you knew the right information or had the ability to act. Now that you have access to all of the information in one place, I hope you take it to heart and make the necessary changes to give your pet their best life.

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Thanks to *Kuddles and Scales*, for whom this project initially started.

Thanks to the Facebook hamster groups where I was able to see what common things new or experienced hamsters struggled with or didn't know as it gave me insight into what else should be included.

Thanks to my wonderful friends and kind strangers who looked over my document to see if it made sense, if it covered everything a beginner hamster owner should know, and to find all the little errors and typos.

Sources

This document relies on knowledge and information supplied by ethical breeders, by hamster-focused organizations, by small animal rescues, by the hamster community, by peer-reviewed articles, and by my own experience. While I'd prefer to have proper, academic sources for everything, I couldn't easily access that information.

Not everything we know about Syrian hamster care has come from studies or academic papers. A lot of it comes from ethical breeders, who care for many hamsters in all their stages of life and of various health and development.

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