



LANDSDOWN VETERINARY SURGEONS

Hamster Information Sheet No. 1 – Ownership

Facts and Figures

Hamsters are nocturnal animals, remember this when choosing a pet. It is unfair to wake them in the middle of the day to play, and you may not want to be woken in the middle of the night.

There are several species of Hamster. The most common, the Golden or Syrian Hamster, lives alone except for short periods when breeding. Other species of hamster (Russian and Chinese) are best kept as a “single sex pair” (ie 2 males or 2 females together) as long as they are together from a very early age.

Lifespan: 2-3 years

Earliest breeding age: Male - 6 weeks
Female - from 4 weeks

Weaning: 21 days

Daily water intake: up to 30ml

Daily food intake: 10-15g

Housing

There are a number of different types of hamster cage on the market, with good and bad points to most of them.

The most commonly seen type is a wire cage with a plastic base, and sometimes having a second or third floor made of wire above. The upper floors are not ideal because many hamsters have poor distance vision and will jump from the top floor without realising how far the drop is (the same applies to playing with hamsters on table tops).

They can also easily break a leg after getting it stuck. A general guideline would be to limit the cage to the base and one upper floor and to cover the wire floor with a rigid plastic sheet to stop little feet slipping through.

Modular plastic caging (eg Rotastack) is not ideal. Cleaning many small chambers is much more of a chore than cleaning one single cage. Ventilation inside these plastic walled cages is poor and buildup of smell from the bedding and urine can cause respiratory disease. Sometimes the plastic connecting tubes can split and again paws get stuck causing wounds and broken legs.

Woodshavings are often used as bedding/flooring material for hamster cages. There has recently been evidence that pine and cedar shavings release essential oils, which can be irritant to the respiratory tract and can increase the risks of lung infections and cancer. Shredded paper (eg toilet roll) makes an excellent alternative.

Hamsters are actually very house-proud creatures and can be very easy to toilet train (for urine at least). Place a large jam jar containing some toilet roll sheets flat on its side in the area your hamster normally uses to pee. Place a small amount of soiled bedding in the jar. Most hamsters quickly get the idea and do all their pees in the “pee jar” making the cage much easier to keep clean and smelling fresh. This works best with a young hamster.

Hamsters are generally solitary creatures that in the wild live in constant fear of being seen, caught and eaten by birds and larger mammals. Secure hiding places where they feel safe and get privacy are very important. Each floor of the cage should have some type of box or house for the hamster to retreat into, and a good idea is to have a deep layer of shredded paper in the base for the hamster to burrow in unseen.

The pee jar should be cleaned daily, as the urine soon becomes smelly and stale and harbours bacteria.

The rest of the cage can then be left to between one and two weeks – cleaning too often is actually bad, as the disturbance is very stressful to the hamster. With Russian hamsters kept in pairs too much cleaning disrupts the territory marking and can lead to fights and aggression toward the owner.

Toys

As with cage flooring “open” wire wheels carry a great risk of broken legs and should not be used. Plastic wheels are ok but, especially when new, the time spent on them should be limited because some hamsters will keep on running until their feet become sore.

Hamsters are very destructive by nature and one of the best forms of recreation is to give them something they can spend time chewing up. Natural branches with the bark on (fruit branches are ideal) are very good, as is a complete roll of toilet paper with a small area slightly torn – hamsters will often keep chewing at the torn area until the whole roll is destroyed, and the shredded paper produced is excellent bedding!

“Hamster balls” are not a good idea – it seems unfair to force a hamster to use the ball without having a choice, and if not very closely supervised accidents can happen – Balls rolling down the stairs or being dropped are not uncommon and can cause injuries, concussion and death.

Food and water

Hamsters are *omnivorous*, which literally means they eat everything!

Dry “Hamster mix” from the pet shop is a reasonable basic diet but it should be supplemented with lots of other things.

In small amounts fruits and vegetables are good, as are small amounts of meat and occasional chicken or lamb bones. Wholemeal bread is OK but *don't* feed very sugary things

like cakes, sweets and chocolate, which can cause very serious diarrhoea.

Many hamsters become bored of their cages quite quickly and anything that gives them an occupation is good for their welfare. In the wild they spend most of their day foraging for food. It is easy to duplicate this behaviour by scattering dry food items all around the cage (mixed in with the paper) so that instead of taking two minutes, getting lunch actually takes hours and provides lots of good activity and exercise. The small amount of soiling of the food by droppings doesn't matter because Hamsters normally show “coprophagic” behaviour – ie they eat small amounts of droppings to get valuable nutrients and vitamins from them.

Fresh water should be available at all times, and should be changed daily. Make sure the drinker is well within the hamster's reach, and that the sipper tube doesn't get blocked.

If you require further information about hamsters or about any other ‘exotic’ pet – birds, reptiles, rabbits, “small furies” etc) then please contact us.

Department of Avian & Exotic species medicine

Neil Forbes BVetMed, DipECAMS, CBiol, MIBiol, FVMA, FRCVS

RCVS & European Recognised Specialist in Zoo and Wildlife Medicine (Avian)

Ron Rees Davies BVSc., CertZooMed, MRCVS
RCVS Certified in Zoological medicine

Jenni Bass DVM, MRCVS

Petra Zsivanovits MRCVS



Clockhouse Veterinary Hospital

Wallbridge, Stroud, Gloucestershire GL5 3JD

Telephone: 01453 752555 Fax: 01453 756065

e-mail: exotic@lansdown-vets.co.uk