



# HAMSTER CARE GUIDE



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Pet ownership has many benefits for children, from teaching them responsibility, to developing language skills and providing support in times of stress. There are also advantages for the family as a whole: it has been found that families with pets have fewer and less serious relationship problems, as animal care helps children to develop empathy and be more selfless in their human relationships.

Dealing with animals encourages children to have respect for others, but it also helps them to build a positive self-image, children who interact with animals tending to have much higher self-esteem than those who don't.

As animals communicate through body language, children who live and play with them learn to interpret this, which in turn helps them to read human body language and so have stronger social skills. Playing with and caring for animals helps to build spoken language skills too, as well as developing concentration. This aspect is particularly beneficial for children with special needs such as Down's Syndrome or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Animal interaction captures their attention and so develops their ability to concentrate.

Perhaps most importantly, animals can support children in times of stress or change, or when human relationships are strained.

## CHOOSING YOUR HAMSTER

### Notes to parents

Hamsters make great family pets as they need very little space and are easy to look after, with either sex making an equally good pet.

Long-haired or teddy bear hamsters are very cuddly, but require more care as they need regular grooming. Dwarf hamsters are very cute, but not all are suitable as children's pets. Russian and Roborovski hamsters tend to be friendlier and easier for children to handle.

### Which one is for you?

There are 24 species of hamster, but only a few of these are kept as pets. The best known are Golden, or Syrian hamsters, but it is possible to find other types of hamsters in pet shops nowadays.

There are many different colours and textures of hamster coat. Short-haired hamsters are the most common, but there are also long-haired hamsters, known as Teddy Bears because of their appearance. Satin hamsters' coats are short, but very smooth and shiny, while Rex hamsters' coats are wavy.

You can also buy dwarf hamsters, which are only around 7cm long. These are very entertaining as they dart and leap around, but make sure to get a type, such as Russian, that is easy to handle.

### Where from?

You can buy hamsters from pet shops or local breeders. Wherever you buy yours from, make sure that it is in a large, clean cage and that the staff or breeders are knowledgeable, and the hamster is used to being handled.

When you buy your hamster it should be between four and eight weeks old. Hamsters are ready to leave their mum and are easiest to tame at this age.





### **A healthy hamster**

The hamster is likely to be asleep when you visit. Once he has been awakened gently, it should be inquisitive.

A healthy hamster should have:

- bright, clear, round eyes that are wide open and have no discharge
- clean ears
- shiny fur
- a clean bottom and tail
- a rounded body
- clean nostrils and easy breathing

You may see a dark patch on each hip. These are the hamster's scent gland and are nothing to worry about.

## **HAMSTER HOME AND EQUIPMENT**

### **Starter kit**

Before you buy a hamster there are some important things that you should have ready at home. These are:

- a cage
- some bedding
- a food bowl
- a water bottle
- some food
- a nest box
- an exercise wheel
- wooden chews

You will also need a small, ventilated box to take your hamster home in. The pet shop may give you a cardboard box. This is ok for short journeys, but a ventilated plastic container with a lid, such as a Living World Small Pals Pen, is more secure and will be useful to keep your hamster in when you are cleaning out his cage.

### **Hamsters like to live alone**

Hamsters are territorial. They always live alone in the wild and prefer to live alone in a cage. If you put two hamsters in one cage they will fight and may even kill one another.

The exception is dwarf hamsters, which are happy to live with other hamsters of the same sex.

### **Buying the right cage**

Hamsters like to have separate areas for eating, sleeping, playing and going to the toilet, so they need lots of room.

The bigger the cage the better, but it should be at least 40cm x 25 cm x 25cm. It should be strong and not easily chewed as hamsters gnaw constantly to wear their teeth down. Also check that the cage fastens well as hamsters are talented escapologists!

A cage with an upstairs like Living World's Deluxe Hamster Resort will give your hamster more living space and he will also enjoy having lots of hidey holes, tubes, frames and boxes to explore.

### **Wire cages**

Wire cages provide a great climbing frame for your hamster and also allow good ventilation, which will help to prevent him getting a respiratory disease.

If you buy a wire cage, make sure that it has a deep, plastic base tray like the Living World Hamster Resort. You can fill the tray with bedding so that your hamster can enjoy burrowing as he would in the wild.

Dwarf hamsters need a cage suitable for their smaller size, such as a mouse cage or Habitrail Mini system. If a normal wire cage is used, they may escape between the wires.





## **Note to parents**

Be careful about getting a wire cage if you have a cat. A determined cat could hook their claws through the wire and may injure your hamster.

## **Tanks**

Glass or plastic, aquarium-style tanks are cat-proof and easy to clean. You can fill it with lots of shavings so that your hamster can burrow without causing a mess on the table and you can easily watch him as he plays.

Make sure that the lid is secure and well-ventilated so that your hamster gets plenty of fresh air. Cleaning a tank regularly is very important. The airflow is more limited so it might begin to smell if you don't. You should also give your hamster something to climb on inside the tank so that he stays fit.

## **Tube systems**

You can buy extendable hamster homes, such as Habitrail, that are made from linked plastic sections. These imitate a wild hamster's burrow and you can connect many 'rooms' on different levels to provide him with a separate bedroom, dining room, larder and playroom, just as he would have in the wild. This type of cage gives your hamster lots of natural exercise.

## **Soft bedding**

You should provide your hamster with lots of soft bedding in his cage. It should be at least 8cm thick so that he can enjoy burrowing.

You can choose from many different types of bedding, for example Living World's Shavings, Alpine Hay, Wheat Straw and Corn Cobs. Shavings are safer than fine sawdust as this may irritate your hamster's eyes and lungs.

Don't use cat litter as this may contain dangerous chemicals and never use cotton wool, tissues or synthetic fibres either as these can kill your hamster. If you want to give him some especially cosy bedding you can buy Living World Hamster Fluff.

## **Where should the cage go?**

Don't put the cage on the floor – it should go on a sturdy table, shelf or stand in a peaceful place so that your hamster can sleep during the day without being disturbed.

The cage should be in a room between 18°C to 20°C, which is a comfortable living-room temperature for humans. If you put your hamster in a cold room or shed he may hibernate.

Make sure the cage is not in a draught, but isn't in direct sunlight either.

## **A nest box for sleeping or food storage**

Your hamster will appreciate having a nest or den in his cage such as the Living World Nest or Living World Logs and Log Cabins. He will use this as a private bedroom or a larder where he can store food.

## **A water bottle for fresh water**

Hamsters need clean, fresh water at all times. You can buy easy to clean, leak-proof water bottles and water bottle holders from Living World, which keep the water clean and prevent it dripping onto food or bedding.

You should change the water daily. When you do this, check that the valve isn't blocked and the water is flowing easily. Make sure that you put the bottle where your hamster can reach it easily.

## **A sturdy food bowl**

You will need a food bowl that doesn't tip over easily. Plastic or stainless steel bowls may be too light. Instead, buy a ceramic or earthenware bowl like Living World's Hamster Ceramic Dish that is sturdy and easy to clean.







## KEEPING YOUR HAMSTER'S HOME CLEAN

Hamsters are very clean animals and don't smell if their cages are cleaned regularly. They often go to the toilet in the same place each time, so this makes the job easier.

Before you begin cleaning, put your hamster in a holding cage, such as a Small Pals Pen, travel box or Living World Exercise Ball. Because hamsters are territorial he won't appreciate you moving his home around and so will get in your way or even nip at first if you don't take him out. They may also get scared from all of the commotion.

### Daily cleaning tasks

Every day you should:

- remove wet bedding and clean the toilet area
- add fresh bedding
- remove uneaten food, seed husks and left-over fruit and vegetables
- wash the food bowl in hot, soapy water and then rinse and dry it thoroughly before refilling with food
- empty, rinse and refill the water bottle, checking it for leaks and blockages

### A thorough clean

Your cage will need to be cleaned thoroughly on a regular basis. If you keep up your daily cleaning tasks, it will be fine to do a full clean every fortnight.

You can usually leave the bedding and food hoard inside nests undisturbed for around four weeks, so only clean these out every other time, unless fresh fruit or veg is present, which would go off.

Each time you fully clean the cage, as well as doing daily cleaning tasks you should:

- Throw out most of the bedding
- Scrub the cage with a pet-safe (not household) disinfectant and then rinse thoroughly.

So that your hamster feels comfortable when he returns to his cage:

- Save some of the unsoiled old bedding and put this with the fresh bedding so that it will still smell like his home.

### Safety check

When cleaning out the cage, check for damage and any holes where your hamster may escape.

Check for rust and sharp edges on wire cages and ensure the door and its catches are secure. Check the seal on tanks and inspect the lid for signs of gnawing.

## FEEDING YOUR HAMSTER

Too much change will upset your hamster, so make sure you feed him the same food as the pet shop for the first week. You can then slowly start to give him new foods.

### Hoarding

The name hamster means 'hoarder' because hamsters love to hoard! He will store a lot of his food, so you will need to give him more than he needs to eat.

Your hamster will use his large cheek pouches to move the food around and can carry up to half his body weight!

### The right balance

To ensure that you give your hamster a healthy diet, containing all the right nutrients, feed him high quality dry food like Living World's Extrusion or Classic food for hamsters. You can also give him small pieces of fresh food and suitable treats and chews.

### Fresh fruit and vegetables

In addition to dry pellets, seed mixture or food blocks give your hamster some small pieces of fresh fruit or vegetables. The ones that are safe for him to eat are: cabbage, broccoli, parsley, apple, pear, carrot, swede, turnip.





So that your hamster doesn't hoard away fresh food that will rot, give it him in small portions and remove any uneaten pieces daily.

### Notes to parents

Many fruit and vegetables are bad for hamsters and can kill them. DON'T give him: onions, chives, leeks, lettuce, aubergines, garlic, raw potatoes, oranges, lemons, avocados, apple pips, peach stones or cherry stones.

Don't give too much fresh food as it can cause digestive upsets - one broccoli floret or slice of apple per day is enough.

### Protein

In the wild, hamsters are omnivores, which means they eat meat as well as fruit and vegetables. You will need to give your hamster some protein. Twice a week, give him a slice of hard-boiled egg, a teaspoonful of cottage cheese, scrambled egg, or a sliver of cooked chicken.

### Supplements

If you feed your hamster a balanced diet, he shouldn't need supplements, but a mineral block will provide some important minerals, such as calcium, and help to keep his teeth healthy.

### No sweets

Don't feed your hamster sweets and especially not sticky sweets like chocolate, fudge or toffee, as these will clog his cheek pouches and make him fat. If you do have an overweight hamster, feed him Living World's Extrusion food, which is full of healthy ingredients and prevents them picking out just their favourite bits.

### Fresh water daily

Make sure that you give your hamster fresh water every day, not just when the bottle is empty.

## TREATS AND TITBITS FOR YOUR HAMSTER

You can use treats and titbits to help you to tame your hamster and win his trust. By feeding him with your hand he will begin to associate you with nice things. Hamsters have poor eyesight and so he may nibble your finger by mistake at first until he gets used to your smell.

Don't give your hamster any sweet or salty treats designed for humans. Instead, try healthy titbits such as raisins or peanuts, or treats made especially for hamsters such as Living World Hamster Drops or Living World Puffs, Donuts, Vegies and Triangles.

Cereal sticks like Living World's Hamster Sticks hang in the cage to make your hamster work for some food, as well as being a treat. The chewable wooden core is also good for his teeth.

## EXERCISE AND PLAY

In the wild, hamsters forage for food and often run many miles each night.

They don't have to do this in a cage and so need other forms of exercise to keep them fit, healthy and happy and prevent them getting overweight.

The items in his cage should provide your hamster with lots of opportunities to explore, climb and scramble in and out of holes and tunnels.

### Hamster wheels

Living World's Resort and Deluxe Resort cages have built in wheels, but you can also buy separate Living World Exercise Wheels. Your hamster will enjoy running around in it and will run up to four or five miles a day.





### **Around the house**

Once your hamster is tame enough to be handled, he will enjoy playing outside his cage in your house.

Make sure that the area you let hamster explore is safe. Hamsters like to gnaw constantly so move electrical cables and also houseplants, as these may be poisonous.

Hamsters love climbing but if he falls, even from as low as one metre, he could seriously injure himself, so don't let him climb outside his cage.

### **Exercise balls**

If your hamster isn't tame enough to be let out yet, you could buy a Living World Exercise Ball. Your hamster can safely run around inside this ventilated ball when he is outside his cage. It is also a useful place to put your hamster when you are cleaning out his cage.

Never leave him to play in his exercise ball alone though, and keep him away from other pets and anything that he could fall off such as steps or stairs. Don't leave him rolling around in his ball for too long – ten to twenty minutes is plenty of time.

Remember that the ball is not a toy for you to play with. You must never throw or roll the ball when your hamster is in it.

### **Notes to parents**

Ensure that all of your hamster's toys and climbing structures are made from non-toxic substances. Regularly check them for sharp edges, weak points where pieces can be nibbled off and gaps where feet might get trapped.

Although other children will enjoy playing with your hamster, they should not get overexcited and frighten the hamster with fast movements and loud voices, or be rough with him. It is best if they are supervised at all times.

## **TAMING AND HANDLING YOUR HAMSTER**

### **Notes to parents:**

Hamsters are not suitable pets for very young children.

Young children should be supervised until they are old enough to understand that hamsters are delicate creatures and not toys.

Small hands can't hold hamsters securely so help children to hold their hamster at all times.

Hamsters are easy to tame if you handle them frequently and carefully. They will only become fun pets if you spend time with them and remain patient when you are taming them.

### **The early days**

Let your hamster settle in during the first few days after you bring him home and don't try to pick him up. Once his cage is familiar and smells of his scent he will feel more comfortable about getting to know you.

Hamsters are long-sighted - they can see predators coming from a distance, but can't see things close up. They have a strong sense of smell and very sensitive hearing, which allow them to distinguish things nearby rather than by sight alone. It's important that you wash your hands before feeding or handling your hamster so that you get rid of any unfamiliar smells and let him get used to your own smell.

### **Taming your hamster**

Once your hamster has been home for a few days, sit near his cage and talk to him so that he gets used to your voice and let him smell your fingers. Because he can't see you clearly close up, you must move slowly and gently or you will scare him. Offer titbits until he begins to see your hand as a friendly provider of treats.





### **Picking up your hamster**

Make sure that your hamster has got to know you and isn't scared of you before you try to pick him up. If he shrieks and goes onto his back when you put your hand near him he still sees you as a predator and is terrified.

When you pick up your hamster, always use both hands. Wrap your fingers from one hand gently under his tummy and put the other hand behind his bottom.

Don't squeeze your hamster or you will injure or even kill him. You must hold him carefully though as hamsters have very loose skin and can easily wriggle out of your hands.

Hamsters don't understand heights so never hold him at a height above the ground in case he jumps out of your hands, or leave him on a tabletop in case he walks off the edge. Don't let him climb on things outside his cage either – he will enjoy climbing up, but will not be able to climb down and is likely to fall off. Even a fall of one metre can cause serious injury.

### **Nervous hamsters and owners**

If you're nervous about picking up your hamster, or need to catch one that's too timid to handle, you can take advantage the fact that hamsters love to explore new holes. Hold an empty can or jar in front of your hamster and he will tend to scurry in. Even if he only peeks his head in, you can gently push the rest of him in. Once he is inside, gently put your hand over the opening.

### **Hamster sounds**

Hamsters don't tend to make sounds that humans can hear. If they do, it is usually a sign of fear or anger. A series of squeaks means that your hamster is irritated. If he grunts in between the squeaks he's very angry, and if chatters his teeth he is warning you. A piercing shriek means that he's absolutely terrified.

### **Sleeping in the daytime**

Hamsters are crepuscular, which means that they sleep most of the day and come out in the morning and early evening. It is important that you respect his body clock and don't wake him when he is sleeping. He will gradually get used to your routine and wake when he hears you come home from school.

### **Hibernating**

If your hamster is very cold, he may fall into a deep, coma-like sleep, known as short-term hibernation. If you find your hamster stiff and cold when it is very cold weather, don't assume that he is dead. Put his cage in a warmer room and warm him in your hands. If he is hibernating, he will gradually wake up.

## **CARING FOR YOUR HAMSTER'S HEALTH**

Hamsters have a short lifespan, but if you care for him well, he will live for two to four years.

### **Your hamster's coat**

Your hamster's fur is a good way of checking how well he is. If he has a sleek coat he is likely to be well, but if it is dull and ruffled it could be a sign that he is getting ill.

#### **Short-coated**

Hamsters constantly groom themselves and short-coated hamsters don't need any help from you until they become old or ill. To prepare for this time, you could get him used to being brushed with a soft toothbrush.

#### **Long-haired**

Long-haired hamsters can't groom themselves properly. You will need to brush a long-haired hamster regularly and gently with a soft toothbrush so that their coats don't become matted. Get your hamster used to this while he is young and before his coat grows to its full length.

Unless he falls into something sticky, don't ever bath your hamster.







### **Note to parents**

If small mats and tangles appear in your hamster's coat, try to tease them apart with your fingers. Larger mats should be snipped out with scissors, but take care not to cut the skin.

### **Constantly growing teeth**

Your hamster's teeth grow constantly, so he needs to continually wear them down by gnawing. For this reason, wooden chews, Living World Sticks and other items for gnawing are not just a treat, but are necessary to keep your hamster's teeth healthy.

If your hamster is dribbling or having eating problems, it's likely that he has problems with his teeth or they have become overgrown and need clipping by a vet.

### **A clean bottom**

Check your hamster's bottom daily. If it is dirty it means he has diarrhoea. This could be because he is stressed, you have not kept his cage clean or he has had too much fresh food.

Hamsters sometimes get a very serious form of diarrhoea called "wet tail". If your hamster develops this, you must take him to the vet immediately for treatment. Before you put him back in the cage, thoroughly clean and disinfect it so that he doesn't get infected again.

### **Colds and pneumonia**

If your hamster has coughs and sneezes, a discharge from his nose and a poor appetite it is likely that he has caught a cold. Keep him warm and put him in a quiet place and if he doesn't get any better take him to the vet or it may develop into pneumonia.

You can prevent your hamster catching a cold by giving him plenty of bedding and keeping his cage out of draughts in a room between 18°C and 20°C. Hamsters can catch colds from humans so avoid handling him if you have a cold.

### **Skin problems**

Old hamsters may get bald patches on their fur, but if a younger hamster loses fur or gets flaky skin, it may be due to him eating too many peanuts, sunflower seeds or biscuits.

Patches of bald, scabby skin could be caused by mites, ringworm or mange. You should take your hamster to the vet quickly so that he can be treated before it gets serious.

When handling your hamster, check his skin for lumps as these may be abscesses or tumours. These also need a visit to the vet for checking and treatment.

### **Accidents**

Most hamster injuries are caused by falls. Your hamster is likely to suffer from shock after a fall so put his cage in a warm, dark place and check on him every few hours.

If you think your hamster has broken a leg take him to the vet to be treated.

Wash any small cuts and bites with a weak salt solution, but if your hamster has cut his pouch carrying a sharp object, you should take him to the vet straight away. Signs that he has done this are his face swelling (when his pouch is empty) he is generally distressed, has lost his appetite and is having difficulty breathing.

### **Heat stroke**

In hot weather, make sure your hamster's cage is in a shady place with lots of ventilation. If placed in direct sunlight he could develop heat stroke, which can be fatal.

He would collapse twitching and trembling. Move his cage immediately to a cooler area and he should recover slowly.

