

Everything You Need To Know



About Your Hamster

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Hamster History

Hamsters are common pets. Their antics provide amusement and they are soft and cuddly companions.

Hamsters are popular pets for several reasons:

- They are small and do not require a great deal of space, so they are perfect for a house or an apartment.
- They do not require walks or much time outside of their cage, so they are very low maintenance.
- They do not require food and water on a daily basis, so they can be left over a weekend quite easily – no need for boarding or for someone to drop by and check on them while you are away for a few days.
- The fact that they are low maintenance makes them ideal pets for children.
- They are inexpensive to acquire and maintain.

Although there are over 24 species of hamsters found in the world, only five species are kept as pets. These five species are as follows:

- ***Mesocricetus auratus***, also known as the Syrian (golden, teddy bear) hamster.
- ***Cricetulus griseus***, also known as the Chinese hamster.
- ***Phodopus campbelli***, or Campbell's Russian hamster
- ***Phodopus sungorus***, the Winter White hamster
- ***Phodopus roborovskii***, also known as Roborovskii's hamster

The Chinese, Russian, Winter White and Roborovskii's hamsters are all classified as dwarf hamsters.

Hamsters were not originally kept as pets. They were originally used for scientific research in the study of the organism that causes *kala-azar* (a disease that affects people in India, China, Africa, Russia, countries in the Mediterranean basin, and some countries in South and Central America. Their quick breeding abilities (most species breed even faster than mice) and physiology made them the ideal laboratory test subjects.

It was soon discovered that these little animals were ideal as pets, and they quickly became popular. Hamsters have been kept as pets for over 50 years and much is known about their habits and care.

Until 1971, all Syrian hamsters in captivity were the direct descendants of a mother and her litter that were captured in 1930 by a researcher at Hebrew University in Jerusalem; however, in 1971 another researcher caught 13 more and those were introduced into the gene pool of both pet and laboratory hamsters.

Despite the inbreeding that has occurred in hamsters over the years, they do not show any ill effects or diseases contributed to this.

Preparing for Your Hamster

It is best for your pet hamster if you have everything ready before you purchase your pet and bring him home. This will make things less stressful for your hamster. Stress can affect hamsters a great deal and can even lead to illness, so it is better to make the transition to your home as pleasant as possible.

First, you need to decide what type of home your hamster will have. There are several options, all with benefits and drawbacks:

Wire Cages

These are fine for a hamster, but keep in mind that wire cages allow bedding, food, droppings, etc., to be pushed out and onto the floor by your pet. This can get quite messy. Another consideration is that hamsters often like to gnaw on the metal bars – not pleasant at all hours of the night. (Syrian hamsters are nocturnal – meaning they are active at night. Dwarf hamsters are usually *crepuscular* – meaning they are active in the early morning or early evening.)

Glass Aquariums

These are a better option if mess and noise are a concern, but they can be somewhat more difficult to clean out than wire cages. Keeping the aquarium clean is a must, because ammonia gases can build up in this type of housing. In addition, the top must always be covered because resourceful hamsters can climb out and escape. (Pet shops sell covers for this purpose – make sure you get one with clips, because hamsters can and will push the cover off!)

Combination of Wire and Plastic

These can be acceptable, but be aware that infrequent cleaning of the plastic can cause the plastic to become cloudy and discoloured.

No matter which type of housing you choose for your pet, here are some things to keep in mind:

1. Make sure you keep it measures at least 24 inches by 12 inches and is at least 10 inches tall. It needs to be large enough so that there is plenty of room for an area for sleeping, one for eating, and one for the elimination of waste. (Some hamsters will store food in their sleeping area, but not all.)
2. Hamsters are not good climbers, so do not choose housing that has different levels and encourages climbing – your pet could get injured from a fall. It is far better to choose a cage with more floor space than one that is taller.
3. Keep the cage clean. Dirty housing makes for sick hamsters.

4. Keep the cage dry – check to make sure that the water bottle does not leak into the bedding. This can happen if the bedding is piled up underneath the water bottle and touches the bottom of the water bottle.
5. Do not use a wooden cage – hamsters will chew right through it. Do not use even a partially wooden cage because a hamster will find the vulnerable spot.
6. Choose a cage that is labelled for hamsters. If you get a cage for another type of rodent, hamsters can escape through the larger openings.
7. Keep the cage out of drafts.
8. Keep the cage out of direct sunlight.

After you choose the type of housing, you will need to get the other essentials, such as food, treats, an exercise wheel, etc. These can be chosen at the same time you purchase the housing. There are many varieties to choose from. Simply choose those that are specifically labelled for hamsters.

Finally, you need to choose how you will bring your pet home. The place where you purchase your hamster will probably give you a cardboard box to transport your hamster, but boxes are quickly chewed through, so be prepared. There are small plastic containers that are ideal for transporting your hamster, and they can be found at your local pet supply store.

You may also want to bring something to cover the transporting cage with, since prolonged direct sunlight is harmful to hamsters. A small towel is sufficient. You may also use cardboard or some other opaque material.

Bedding Choices

Your hamster needs to have bedding in his cage. Bedding is necessary to absorb urine and the occasional drip from the water bottle. It reduces odours and provides a warm place for your pet to sleep. Bedding also encourages natural behaviours, such as burrowing and building a nest to sleep in.

Pet supply stores provide a large variety of bedding to choose from. There are wood shavings, paper, wood pulp and many other options.

Cedar Shavings

Cedar shavings have been a very popular choice for bedding for many years. They have an aromatic aroma that does an excellent job at masking odours and is very pleasing to the pet owner.

Unfortunately, cedar shavings have been implicated in possibly causing and/or aggravating respiratory conditions in small animals. The compounds that make the pleasant aroma also may cause respiratory issues for your hamster. Some studies show that it affects liver function in some small animals.

Pine Shavings

Pine shavings have not been shown to have any side effects, and are a good alternative to cedar shavings. They do not contain the oils that are so prevalent in the cedar shavings. These shavings are often used in laboratory facilities, so they are considered quite reliable.

Recycled Wood Pulp or Paper

Bedding made from recycled wood pulp and papers are a wonderful bedding choice. Many of the newer varieties are designed to help control odour and have excellent absorption rates. They can help hamsters be healthier by helping the housing area stay cleaner.

Whichever bedding type you choose, make sure you clean the entire cage regularly.

Feeding Your Hamster

Good nutrition will help your hamster have a longer, healthier life. In the wild, hamsters are omnivorous, which means they eat both plant and animals. In their natural habitat, they will eat seeds (such as barley, wheat, peas, soybeans and millet) in addition to eating plant shoots, leaves, flowers and root vegetables (such as potatoes, carrots, and beets). Spiders, insects and other invertebrates are also eaten.

Basic nutrition for your hamster includes the right balance of carbohydrates, fats, proteins, minerals, vitamins, and water.

Carbohydrates

Carbohydrates, or carbs, provide energy and perform other functions. Good sources for carbohydrates for your hamster include grains like oats and corn.

Fats

Fat is a concentrated source of energy. Fat contains nearly twice as many calories per serving as protein or carbohydrates. A good guideline for a hamster's diet is around 5 percent of calories from fat. Fat content is important for cell function and is also necessary for the absorption of fat-soluble vitamins (like vitamins A, D and E). Fats can also help prevent skin ailments. A sign of fat deficiency in the diet can show up as rough, thinning hair and scaly skin.

Minerals

Minerals (which include calcium, phosphorous, sodium, etc.) help in the development of healthy bones and teeth, nerve and muscle function, and proper water balance within the body. A deficiency can lead to serious health issues. Trace minerals are also important, but only in very small amounts. Trace elements help with the oxygenation process of cells.

Proteins

Protein is needed for functions such as antibody, hormone, and enzyme production. It is also needed for the growth and maintenance of muscle tissue. The amount of protein needed by your hamster is determined by a number of factors. Adult hamsters need less protein than young ones. Young hamsters and hamsters that are pregnant or nursing need more protein. A good diet for your pet should contain somewhere between sixteen and twenty percent protein.

Vitamins

Vitamins are necessary for facilitating chemical reactions in the body. They also help prevent

diseases and aid in the clotting mechanism of the blood. Vitamins are classified as either water-soluble or fat-soluble. Hamsters need different vitamins than people do. As an example, hamsters produce their own vitamin C – people must obtain it from outside sources, such as citrus fruits.

There are over-the-counter vitamin drops available that can be administered via your pet's water bottle. Read label directions for proper administration. You can also check with your pet's veterinarian.

Water

Water is essential for all of the functions in your hamster's body. A pet hamster cannot survive for long without fresh water, so make sure you have an ample supply and take care to keep it clean and fresh. Do not use a dish to provide water for your pet. It will get dirty quickly and can also tip over, causing damp bedding and creating an unhealthy environment (which can lead to stress and disease).

The amount of water your pet needs depends on the moisture content of his food. If you provide your hamster with small amounts of fresh vegetables, fruits and live insects, they will require much less water.

The amount needed will also depend on the size and breed of your hamster. Dwarf hamsters will usually drink less than five millilitres per day. Syrian hamsters will drink around twenty millilitres per day. (There are around thirty millilitres in one ounce.) If the amount of water in your hamster's bottle does not seem to decrease, check to make sure the nozzle on the bottle is not clogged.

In a perfect scenario, a pet owner should change the water every day, but this is not always practical. At the very least, water should be changed once per week, taking care to wash the water bottle well, both inside and out.

Check to make sure the end of the nozzle is not worn or jagged – hamsters often enjoy chewing on the end of the water bottle nozzle. If it becomes damaged, replace it. Damage can cause leaking, which can cause bedding to become damp – an open invitation for disease. Jagged edges can also injure your pet.

It is a good idea to keep a spare water bottle in case the old one gets damaged and leaks badly.

Types of Food

Choosing the right type of foods for your hamster is important for long-term good health. Proper nutrition is crucial. There are several options to choose from. A variety of these options will provide the best overall diet for your pet.

Reading labels is an important step in choosing foods for your hamster. Pre-packaged foods

sold in stores will have nutritional content on the label. There should be percentages listed on the label as to the amount of fat, protein, etc., present.

Variety is not only important for health; it also helps make a happier pet. No pet enjoys eating the same old boring food each and every day.

Food must also be fresh. Do not buy large amounts of food because it will go stale before you use it all. Buying in bulk does not save you money if you have to throw food away.

Live Food

Hamsters enjoy eating live crickets, moths, and mealworms. You can catch moths easily by turning on a porch light and waiting for them to come. Hamsters will happily chase moths around their cage and enjoy catching them.

Crickets and mealworms are sold at pet store for snakes and other reptiles. You can watch hamsters chase after and catch these creatures - and eat them.

Occasionally, a hamster will be afraid of insects and want nothing to do with them. If this is the case, do not push the issue. Your hamster should not suffer any ill effects if he does not receive live food, provided he has a well-rounded diet.

Hay

Hamsters need fibre. Many hamsters prefer eating hay instead of eating the pre-packaged alfalfa pellets found in commercial mixes. You can place the alfalfa on the floor or stuff some in a toilet-paper tube. (Hamsters enjoy working for their food.)

Most larger pet stores sell small packages of hay. There are two types – grass hay and legume hay. Grass hay is made of orchard grass, timothy, oat hay and mixed grass. Legume hay consists of alfalfa and clover, and hamsters usually prefer this type.

If loose hay is not available, cubed hay is an option that is worthwhile to try.

Fresh Produce

Hamsters dearly love fresh fruits and vegetables. In addition to providing important nutrients, fresh produce can create an excellent opportunity for you to bond with your pet. Hamsters are quite willing to take fresh fruits and vegetables straight from an outstretched hand, and they can be used for a little bribery now and then if need be (such as when you wish to coax your pet out of his nesting box, for example).

Be sure to wash and dry produce before offering it to your hamster. Offer no more than one-half teaspoon at a time. This will make sure that the treat can be handled easily, be able to be stuffed into a cheek pouch, and not cause diarrhoea. It also helps make sure the treat will not be tucked away in the food storage area long enough to spoil or attract unwanted insects (such as ants).

If your hamster does tuck the morsels away, check each day to and remove any fresh food that has not been eaten. Bacteria and mould can also be a health hazard from fresh foods stored too long.

Safe foods would include carrots, peas, broccoli, spinach, squash, corn and green beans. Hamsters can safely eat most fruits.

Dried Fruit and Nuts

Dried fruits and nuts can be given in moderation, but make sure that these foods (like fresh produce) are not allowed to stay in the cage long enough to spoil.

Foods to Avoid

Although hamsters will greedily devour foods such as potato chips, candy, cookies, and other “human” snack foods, these are really not healthy options for your hamster.

Avoid certain vegetables, such as iceberg lettuce, kidney beans, onions, peanut butter, raw potatoes and rhubarb.

Make sure your pet does not eat any household plants, whether or not you purposely feed them to your hamster or not. Make sure housing is a safe distance from any houseplants and that your pet cannot reach through the bars of his house and grab one. Household plants can be quite deadly if ingested by your pet.

Also avoid the high-fat pre-packaged mixes, such as the seed and nut mixes designed for parrots and cockatiels. When choosing a pre-packaged mix, make sure the packaging states it is suitable for hamsters.

Avoid feeding your pet the same thing every day (such as laboratory pellets). Variety will keep your pet happier and healthier.

Selecting a Hamster

Selecting a hamster is a very important process. Choosing the wrong hamster can make you regret your decision to have a hamster in the first place!

First, decide on the breed you want. While temperaments can vary from individual to individual, there are some general tendencies for each breed.

Syrian Hamsters

These hamsters are the largest breed of hamsters kept as pets and are not as quick as dwarf hamsters. This makes them easier (in general) for children to handle. They calm down as they age, so they are less likely to jump out of your hands when they are older. Syrians are more likely to hold still for and get used to petting and cuddling than dwarf hamsters. Keep in mind that Syrians are very territorial and must be kept one to a cage.

They reach six to eight inches when full grown and come in a variety of colours.

Chinese Hamsters

Also known as the striped hamster and rat-like hamster, these dwarf hamsters can be nervous, and untamed adults are usually difficult to tame. Once tamed, however, they tend to become easily handled.

They reach four to five inches upon becoming adults. They are greyish-brown with a black stripe with a silky fur.

Roborovskii's Hamsters

This is the smallest species of pet hamster. They are also the fastest and move very quickly. They are so fast, in fact, that they can be difficult to handle. They are not highly recommended for children since they are so quick and not easily handled.

They only reach about two inches in length when full grown. They are sandy brown with white markings.

Winter White and Campbell's Hamsters

These species are rather easy to tame, provided they get plenty of human interaction. At one time, these two species were considered one species, but it has since been discovered that they are not the same.

These hamsters reach approximately 4 inches in length when adults.

Gender does not seem to play affect in the temperament, so the gender of a hamster is not a concern unless you plan to breed them.

Watch the hamster as it interacts with the store employee or other handler. If the hamster seems very nervous or bites, he is not a good candidate for becoming a new member of the family. You want to find a hamster that is curious and not afraid of people.

Check to make sure the hamster appears to be in good health and does not have any symptoms, such as a runny nose, discharge from the eyes, or wet fur near the tail. These can all be signs of disease.

Look at the condition of the housing of your hamster. Make certain that the housing is clean and free of a strong smell of ammonia. Dirty cages cause stress and disease in hamsters, so even if your hamster is not sick at the moment, it might become ill after coming home due to the added stress of a new environment. Don't take the chance.

Finally, choose a younger hamster. A hamster that is older is often much more difficult to tame and can have problems adjusting to a new environment. A younger hamster will have more years to enjoy being a welcome addition to your family.

Children and Hamsters

Caring for a pet is one of the pleasures of childhood. It develops responsibility and a sense of pride in having the care of a living being in your hands. Not only that, but it is fun!

Owning a hamster is often a first real test of whether or not a child is ready for owning a pet that requires more care, such as a cat or a dog. Hamsters need more care than fish, but they are able to handle being “forgotten” for a day or two without harm (unlike cats or dogs). They are also small and not intimidating for a child.

Caring for a hamster can show important lessons, such as the fact that pets are not toys. Children need to learn that a pet is a living, breathing creature that requires gentleness and nurturing in order to live.

They need to learn how to play gently and how to be compassionate, and having a pet certainly helps with that process.

Hamsters are good at teaching children how to put the need of others before themselves. For example, children need to learn that hamsters need to be allowed to sleep, even when the child would rather play. They can be taught that hamsters need not be handled too often, and just because the child is not tired, the hamster might be.

Hamsters can teach a child to watch for signs of fear or fatigue, and these can be wonderful lessons to apply to “real life” for the child.

Parents need to realize and accept, however, that kids will be kids. Parents will need to make sure that food is bought when needed and that their child is actually performing the duties necessary for having a pet. Parents need to make sure that fresh water and other materials are provided, along with routine cage cleaning and opportunities for exercise. If the child is very young, the parent will be solely responsible for the care of the hamster and only allow supervised interaction between the child and the pet.

Since the parent is involved in the process of caring for the hamster, it really does help if the parent is enthusiastic about the new pet. If you, as a parent, are not comfortable with handling a hamster or any other aspect of caring for one, then perhaps a hamster is not the right choice until a child is much older and can do the majority of tending to the animal with minimal supervision.

Aside from the lessons learned by caring for a small animal, having children around hamsters can provide many other lessons as well. Having a beloved hamster die can be a difficult lesson, but it helps children deal with an issue on a smaller scale something they will have to deal with later on in life on a much larger scale. Openly discussing issues about things affecting your pet, such as illness and death, with a child will make it easier to have these discussions later in life- when the issue is much more serious.

One final note about children and hamsters – two of the causes of sudden death in hamsters

are starvation and dehydration. Many of these instances have happened, presumably, when a child was the primary caretaker for a hamster. Parents must take steps to make sure that their children are not neglecting their pets. Make the learning process meaningful for children and pleasant for the pet.

Helping Your Hamster Settle In

Coming home with a new hamster is exciting for you, but remember that this is a stressful event for your hamster. The key to having a successful relationship with your pet is getting off to the right start. Here are a few tips:

1. Ask for a handful of bedding from your hamster's old housing and place it in the new one. The scent will help calm the hamster and remind him of his old home and will help keep him calmer.
2. For the first few days, keep the hamster's new home partially covered (all but one side) and away from the hustle and bustle of the household. (Make sure there is still enough air circulation.)
3. Do not try to handle the hamster any more than is absolutely necessary for the first few weeks. Let him settle in and get acquainted with his new surroundings before trying to hold him.
4. If you have children, stress the fact that the hamster is not to be touched, poked, prodded or handled while he is settling in.
5. Try to limit noise and disruption as much as possible while doing necessary tasks such as feeding, changing the water, cleaning the cage, etc.
6. Talk softly to your pet so that he can get used to your voice, but be very careful not to wake him up or startle him. Hamsters are notoriously grouchy when awakened. Speak in a soft, normal tone of voice.
7. Observe the hamster to check for any signs of illness. If you have concerns, be sure to contact the person from whom you purchased your hamster.
8. Be sure to provide plenty of fresh food and water in order to make the hamster feel secure and not worried about whether or not food and water will be plentiful. Coming from a crowded housing arrangement, many hamsters feel less stress once they settle into a quiet life of solitude.
9. Make sure you do not place your pet near a heating or air conditioning vents. Drafts are not good for hamsters. Temperature swings are not good, either.
10. Make sure you provide a "nesting box" for your hamster. They can be found at pet supply stores. A nesting box allows your hamster to feel safer and more secure.

Taming Your Hamster

Taming your hamster is one of the keys to having an enjoyable member of the family. Tame hamsters provide fun interaction and are quite a delight.

Ideally, you will purchase a hamster that has been tamed, but this is not always the case. There is a difference between a hamster being unafraid of people and allowing a person to handle him. Patience is the key to taming your hamster. You can expect the taming process to take several weeks.

Remember that hamsters (like many humans) do not like being awakened in order to play. If you must wake your hamster to play, do not do so until he is fully tame, and even then be sure to wake him gently. Call his name softly, rap on the cage lightly, and allow him several minutes to get good and awake before you try to handle him. A treat after waking him and allowing him time to shake off the grogginess can help his mood, too.

In order to tame a hamster, you can use the following guidelines. Again, patience is the key. He will not become tame overnight.

First, get him used to your scent. Let him sniff your hand. Offer him food from your hand and allow him to approach you. Remember that hamsters are very nearsighted and cannot see for more than a few inches. Do not startle him by reaching in to grab him or suddenly shoving food in his face. Make slow, calm moves. He might lick your fingers and even give them an exploratory (but not painful) nibble. (Make sure you do not have anything on your fingers that a hamster might *really* like, because then he may do more than nibble! Washing and drying your hands before interacting with your pet is always a good idea.)

When your hamster feels confident and is responsive to your presence, you can start to pet him and stroke his fur. Be gentle and smooth in your strokes. If he is jumpy, don't push the issue. Simply keep feeding him and trying to pet him until he is comfortable with this step.

Talk soothingly to your pet while you are feeding him and stroking his fur. (In time, some hamsters will respond to your voice and even come eagerly when called.) Have the hamster associate your voice with pleasant things, such as food and treats.

Once he is comfortable with being touched, then you can move to trying to hold and handle him. Gently scoop him up in your hands. Hold him loosely (because if you hold him too tightly he will struggle to get away) and talk in the same, soothing voice you have used all along. At first, it might help to hold him close to your chest so it feels more secure for him. Only do this for a minute or two at first, then hold him for longer and longer periods.

If, at any time, your hamster becomes aggressive, nippy, flattens himself on the bottom of the cage, runs and hides, grinds his teeth, squeals, or otherwise shows he is upset, stop trying to handle him and simply talk to him softly. Some hamsters will become so frightened that they will urinate or defecate. Wait for a while before trying to approach him again if you see any of these behaviours.

How to Clean the Housing Area

Keeping a clean living space for your pet is crucial to your pet's good health.

Plan on cleaning your pet's cage at least once a week. Twice a week is better, but this is not always possible. If you have more than one hamster in a cage (especially a smaller one), you will need to clean it more often. If you have only one or two hamsters in a much larger cage (such as a 20 gallon aquarium), then you could get away with cleaning it every 7 to 10 days.

Hamster droppings do not have an odour, but their urine can develop a strong smell. The only time you should notice an odour would be if the cage has not been cleaned in an appropriate amount of time. Hamsters are quite odourless when provided with clean living conditions. You should clean the hamster's cage before it becomes foul smelling. If you notice an odour, it is past time to clean the cage. Do not clean the cage only when the odour reminds you to – this practice is not healthy for your hamster, nor is it desirable for you and your household.

First, gently remove your hamster from the housing unit and put him in a safe place. (An exercise ball, carrying cage or the bathtub will suffice for a short time – make sure the bathtub is completely dry before placing the hamster in there.)

Remove all of the bedding and replace it with fresh bedding. (In between full cleanings you can clean out only the area your hamster uses for urination and defecation. A kitty litter scoop works well for this purpose.)

Wash or replace any toys in the housing area. If the toys have absorbed urine, it is best to replace them instead of washing them. (Toys need to be replaced periodically regardless of whether or not you think they have absorbed urine, but if they give off an odour of ammonia, then they need to be replaced immediately.)

Once a month, do a thorough cleaning. This means remove the old bedding, wash the cage or aquarium, and disinfect it with a weak bleach solution (using one tablespoon of bleach for each gallon of water will do quite nicely). Make sure you rinse the cage completely and allow it to dry before replacing your hamster.

When Hamsters Multiply

You may not intentionally set out to breed your hamster, but things happen. More than one surprised pet owner has discovered that their new addition has come home from the pet store pregnant. Asking for a store employee to give you a male does not necessarily solve the problem – male and female hamsters can be difficult to tell apart.

Whether or not you have intentionally brought hamster offspring into this world, you need to learn how to care of them – and their mother.

Syrian (Golden) Hamsters

Syrian hamsters can breed when they are only 45 days old. They usually have between five and nine pups (baby hamsters) in a litter. They have a gestation period (the time they are pregnant) of about 15 to 18 days. Pups are born hairless and helpless. They are also born with their eyes shut. They are weaned when they are 20 to 25 days old.

Dwarf Hamsters

Depending on the species, dwarf hamsters mature later than Syrian hamsters. They mature at around 60 to 135 days. Their gestation period is from 18 to 25 days.

Female hamsters are known for abandonment of litters and also cannibalism. These events occur most often if the hamster is a first-time mother, if she is stressed or disturbed, or if she was not provided enough nutrition while pregnant. (Unclean housing conditions are a source of stress for pregnant hamsters, but make sure not to disturb pregnant hamsters any more than absolutely necessary.)

Make sure you do not touch the pups until they are completely weaned. It is also a good idea to separate the males and females once they are weaned and before they are able to breed.

If you decide to breed hamsters, please note that females can breed for about 1 ½ years, and that they breed very quickly. If you breed them on purpose, make sure you can find homes for the pups. Start inquiring early, because if you wait too late you might end up with another litter while trying to find a home for the first litter!

While it is possible to spay or neuter a hamster, it is not done often (unlike rabbits or ferrets). The easiest way to prevent unwanted pregnancy for your female hamster is to keep her away from males in separate housing. Since the females become fertile so often (as often as every 4 days), it is not very practical to only keep her away from the male only when she is fertile.

If you have children in the home, be sure to keep the pregnant hamster away from them until after the pups are born and are a week or two old. If the mother is disturbed, she might abandon or devour the pups, and this can be traumatizing for young children.

Hamster Illnesses and Ailments

Be alert for any signs of illness in your hamster. Remember that having a clean, dry housing environment is the first key to good health for your hamster. Clean the housing area frequently and make sure that there is no spilled water or other mess in the housing area.

Also, most of the illnesses found in hamsters are not a threat to humans. Diseases that can be transmitted from animals to humans are called *zoonotic* diseases. Salmonella and ringworm are two examples of zoonotic diseases. Proper hand washing before and after handling your pet is a good way to help prevent such diseases. If your hamster is diagnosed with a zoonotic illness, your veterinarian will give you further instructions on how to prevent the spread of the disease.

Hamsters that are solitary are less at risk than those who are kept in large numbers, and use caution whenever introducing a new hamster to your existing pets. A hamster that appears healthy can carry disease that you may not notice right away.

Hamsters do not require annual wellness exams like other pets do, but it is important to find a qualified veterinarian before illness strikes. Call local veterinarians in your area and inquire as to whether or not they accept hamsters as patients. If they do, it is a good idea to find out the rates for various services for future reference.

Hamsters can suffer from injuries, diseases, and improper husbandry (house cleaning). Here are some common things to look for:

Abscesses

These are usually due to a secondary infection from a wound, possibly received in a fight with another hamster, but it could also be received in other ways. While there are ways that some breeders handle this that require draining the wound and then treating it, this is a gruesome process and is not recommended. Taking your hamster to the vet is the preferred way to handle this situation.

Injuries

Hamsters can suffer serious injury when dropped, sat upon, squeezed or otherwise mishandled. If your pet seems to be in pain after any type of incident, it is best to take him to the vet right away. The best way to help your pet is to avoid injuries in the first place.

Hamsters are very fragile animals, so great care should be given when you are handling your pet. Because they are so quick and are prone to leaping at an unexpected moment, you should be cautious about holding your hamster when standing. Hold your hamster loosely and do not squeeze your hamster. If your hamster seems like he is trying to escape, return him to his cage rather than risk hurting him. Kids should be warned about the unpredictability of hamsters and how they can leap when they feel anxious or squeezed. Sitting while handling your pet is a good first defence against broken bones and internal injuries.

Hamster exercise balls are also another source of broken bones in hamsters. If you have your pet rolling around in one of these clear hollow plastic balls, make sure he is away from stairs and steps. Also make sure he is not somewhere that someone could accidentally kick the ball and send your poor pet flying across a room. It is best to keep your hamster in one room of the house (preferably away from other family members) whenever he is in his exercise ball. If he must be in other parts of the house, make sure you let other family members know that your pet is out and rolling around.

Hamsters that are given free reign around the house are quite likely to be accidentally kicked or stepped on, which can also lead to broken bones. Hamsters face other hazards (such as ingesting paint, carpet, wood chips and other materials) when allowed to roam freely, so this is not a recommended way to let your pet exercise. Allowing a pet room to roam also makes him vulnerable to being attacked by other pets.

If your hamster does have a fall or other injury resulting in a broken bone, he needs to be seen by a veterinarian. Hamsters can suffer internal injuries from a fall and must be seen immediately to help prevent a fatality.

Colds/Pneumonia

If you observe symptoms such as wheezing, difficulty breathing or eyes glued shut; take your hamster to the vet right away. You might also notice weight loss and a discharge from the nose, coupled with a general lethargy.

Tyzzler's Disease

This is a highly contagious disease (from hamster to hamster – it is not a zoonotic disease) and is usually fatal. Symptoms include lack of activity, a scruffy-looking coat, diarrhoea and dehydration; however, some hamsters display no obvious symptoms before death. This disease is common in hamsters with unclean housing areas and who have a lot of stress. Fortunately, it is rare in animals with clean housing and who are well-cared-for.

Diabetes

This is a non-infectious disease that has been documented in Campbell's Russian hamsters. Symptoms include excessive thirst and excessive urination. Treatment options are limited to changes in diet. Avoid giving fruit to a diabetic hamster. You may also remove corn and peas from their food. A veterinarian can give an accurate diagnosis and specific recommendations for your pet.

Glaucoma

This condition has been found in Winter White hamsters. While there is no cure for the affliction in hamsters, your veterinarian can prescribe eye drops for the pain.

Cheek Pouch Troubles

The cheek pouches that hamsters use for food storage and transportation can become pierced, impacted or otherwise damaged. Symptoms include not being able to empty the pouches or having an *everted* cheek pouch (one that is turned inside out). If you suspect that there has been an injury to the hamster's cheek pouches, take him to the vet to be treated.

Lumps and Bumps

Lumps under the hamster's skin can be either a tumour or an abscess. A trip to the veterinarian will determine the cause and treatment. Surgery might be necessary for a tumour.

Clean housing is the first key to a healthy hamster. Change bedding regularly and clean out water bottles weekly. Even if the water bottle looks fine, use a bottle washer (found in the infant supply section of stores) to thoroughly scrub the inside of the bottle once a week. (Make sure you rinse all of the soap out after washing.) Unseen bacteria can build up and cause disease.

Hamsters live an average of 2 to 3 years when healthy, so keeping your pet well and being alert to signs of disease (and taking action when signs are noticed) will help your pet enjoy a longer, more productive life.

If you ever have a concern with your pet's health, do not hesitate to contact your veterinarian for advice. He or she will be able to guide you.

Daily Life with Your Hamster

Once your hamster is home, settled, and tame, you and your new pet will find a comfortable daily routine. There are a few things you need to know in order to make this time more pleasant for both you and your hamster.

Activity Cycles

Syrian hamsters are nocturnal. They wake up in the early evening and are active all night long. If you have the housing unit for your hamster in your bedroom, you will be listening to hamster activity all night long – running on a wheel, eating, burrowing, and chewing. If there are metal bars on his cage, your hamster will often rattle them.

Dwarf hamsters are most active in the early evening and the early morning. They sleep for periods during the night and during the day.

Take these activity cycles into consideration when placing your hamster in the home. A room where no one sleeps might be the best option.

Exercise

Hamsters need exercise, whether it is a wheel in his cage or a ball that rolls around the house. Make sure if you have a ball (available at pet supply stores) everyone in the household knows when your pet is in it. Injury to your pet can occur if someone accidentally knocks the ball across the room. Household members can be injured if they trip over the ball, as well.

Make sure the ball cannot roll down flights of stairs, and keep other pets (such as dogs and cats) away from your pet while he is in his ball.

If you choose a wheel, make sure it runs easily and does not squeak – otherwise you will be up half the night with the noise.

Watching your hamster while exercising is one of the joys of being a hamster owner, but just understand the drawbacks of what type of exercise you choose for your pet.

Playing With Your Pet

Once you find out the daily routine of your pet, you can anticipate the times he will be most receptive to playing with you. If you play with your hamster at around the same time each evening, your pet will come to expect your daily visits and possibly even come to greet you as you approach.

Make sure you read the clues to your pet's mood. If your pet shows signs of fatigue or if he seems irritable, put off playtime for a while. Try again later that evening or perhaps wait until

the next day.

Feeding

If you establish a certain time when you feed your hamster (such as when he first wakes up, or right after exercising), he will begin to understand what his daily routine is and will become trained to respond to those times. This can be a good way to establish bonding with your pet.

Toys

Toys are an important part of providing entertainment for your pet. An interesting housing area is better for your pet and helps to reduce stress. Without toys, your pet will become bored and less playful.

There are many toys that are available in local pet supply stores. Make sure you purchase those that state they are made for hamsters, not for other rodents. (If other animals are listed, that is fine – just make sure that “hamster” is specifically mentioned, as well.)

You can also provide your own items for your pet to play with – empty cardboard tubes from paper towels and toilet paper make great toys. Just make sure that anything you put in his housing area is safe to chew – because he will definitely chew on anything and everything you put in his cage.

Do not put too many toys in his living area, however, because he needs room to run around.

Make sure you switch toys around from time to time. Don't just replace toys with the same toy – try different toys and see how your hamster reacts.

Introducing a New Hamster to Your Current Pet

Syrian hamsters are not very sociable animals. Syrian hamsters are perfectly content having a house all to themselves, and they need to be kept in a solitary housing area. Syrians can and will kill each other if kept together for any length of time.

However, if you have your heart set on getting a new dwarf hamster and housing it with your current pet, there are several methods you can use when introducing a new hamster into your home where there already is a hamster living.

First, place the original hamster in a wire cage.

Place the new hamster in a wire cage next to the original one.

Push the two cages close to each other so that the two hamsters can smell each other, but do not place them close enough to reach each other.

Over the next several days, switch each hamster to the other cage each day. This will get them to have similar scents.

After 2 or 3 days, try to house them in the same cage, but be careful to watch them closely. If they fight, you will have to keep switching them to each others cage for a few more days.

Be sure to watch your hamsters and look for signs of injuries – cuts, scratches, etc. You can also watch for signs that one hamster is scared. If one hamster is constantly cowering or hiding and the other is freely roaming around, then there clearly is a problem. Providing 2 of everything – nest boxes, exercise wheels, food bowls, etc. - can cut down on fighting.

If the hamsters cannot stop fighting, you will have to house them in separate cages. Keeping them in the same cage could cause the death of the weaker one.

Enjoy Your Hamster

Hamsters are wonderful pets. With proper care and nurturing, they are a delightful addition to any home.

Just remember these final tips:

- Be gentle.
- Be patient.
- Be observant.
- Pay attention to your hamster's moods and symptoms.
- Show lots of love.

Hamster Clubs and Resources

Hamster clubs and organizations can be a great source of fun for you and your pet. Some clubs organize hamster shows (like dog and cat shows) and other activities. Check your local listings for local groups that meet.

There are so many resources available for the hamster enthusiast that it would be impossible to list them all here; however, this list should be a great start.

Please Note

This list is presumed to be accurate, but contact information for organizations are subject to change for a variety of reasons.

American Rat, Mouse and Hamster Society

8475 Westmore Road #30

San Diego, CA 92126

www.altpet.net/rodents/rats/ARMHS.html

The British Hamster Association (BHA)

P.O. Box 825

Sheffield S17 3RU, UK

www.britishhamsterassociation.org.uk

The Hamster Society

www.hamsoc.org.uk

National Hamster Council (NHC)

National Secretary

P.O. Box 4

Llandovery

SA20 OZH, UK

Email: info@hamsters-uk.org

www.hamsters-uk.org

www.healthypet.com

This resource is part of the American Animal Hospital Association - an organization committed to providing care for small animals.

www.petfinder.org

Use this site to find shelters, rescue groups and more. There are also classified ad space for pets wanted, etc.