

Hamsters are quiet, fun, and easy to care for companions. Providing the proper care and taking the time to discover their individual likes and dislikes will ensure your hamster's health and well-being.

## Types of Pet Hamsters

Syrian Hamsters are the largest at 6-7 inches, and are the easiest to handle. Their average lifespan is 2-3 years and they should be housed alone. Long-coated varieties are referred to as "Teddy Bear" hamsters.

Campbell's/Russian Dwarf Hamsters are smaller (3-4 inches) and faster. They tend to be shy and require more patience with handling. Their lifespan ranges from 1½-2 years, and they too should be housed alone.

Roborovski ("Robo") Dwarf Hamsters are the smallest at 2½ inches long, and also the fastest - they are fun to watch and interact with! Despite their tiny size, their life expectancy is 3-4+ years. Some Robo hamsters can be kept in pairs or groups if introduced at a young age.

## Housing and Enrichment

The size and type of hamster cage will vary with the species, but generally a bare minimum would be a 10-gallon tank (10" wide by 20" long by 12" tall) or an equivalent open wire cage. A 20-gallon long tank (30" x 12" x 12") is even better, and of course larger cages are always preferred. If you use a wire cage, make sure it has a deep tray and no wire floor. Any shelves or ramps should be of a solid surface so little paws do not get caught, and bar spacing should be no more than ¼" for smaller species or ½" for Syrians. We strongly advise against the use of plastic tube style cages as they lack ventilation and are very difficult to clean properly.

Because hamsters love to burrow, cover the floor with at least two inches of bedding material such as Carefresh (or a similar paper product), or aspen wood shavings. Pine is not recommended, and cedar shavings should never be used. Cages should be spot-cleaned daily. Change bedding completely every 10-14 days, depending on size and number of inhabitants - more frequently for small cages or cages housing multiple animals, less frequently for very large enclosures.

Your hamster will need a variety of enrichment items to provide security, stimulation, and exercise. Nesting boxes, tunnels, hamster-safe wooden chew toys, untreated apple branches, and boxes to play in are all appreciated. Exercise wheels are an important part of any hamster set-up and should have a solid surface, not made from bars or wire grates. We do **not** recommend "hamster balls" as they can be scary for your hamster and have been known to cause injuries.

Dwarf and Roborovski Hamsters will greatly benefit from sand baths. Purchase "bathing sand" sold specifically for hamsters or chinchillas and offer it in a special container designed for this purpose or simply use a shallow dish. Hamsters don't need constant access to the sand and if left in their cage too long they will usually soil it. Offer it for a day or two and then remove it until next time, depending on how much your hamster likes it, and the condition of their coat.

## Diet

The base of your hamster's diet should be a high quality rodent mix, either a pelleted type or muesli style, or both. Supplement with fresh foods and offer a handful of fresh timothy or orchard grass hay - this is good for them to eat, and it is also fun to play in and nest with.

Water, preferably filtered, should be kept fresh and the water bottle clean. Hamsters also like to hide their food, so check their bedding and houses for any perishable treats. If they have enough fresh food to hide, you are giving them too much at a time; small amounts are best.

Some good ideas are sunflower seeds, peanuts, certain fruits and vegetables, cooked potato, mealworms, rolled oats, plain cottage cheese, plain yogurt, tofu, and cooked plain pasta. Some important foods to avoid are tomato leaves, carrot and potato tops, raw beans, raw potato, citrus fruits, onion, raw kidney beans, rhubarb, and anything high in sugar.

## Health

Spend some time with your hamster every day and if you see any of these signs, contact your veterinarian immediately:

- Lethargy or sudden irritability
- Walking/moving stiffly or hunched posture
- Dull or sunken looking eyes; overgrown or misshapen teeth
- Decrease in appetite or not eating at all; diarrhea, weight loss
- Excessive scratching or hairloss; lumps or bumps

## Handling and Socialization

Hamsters are individuals, each with their own personality and behaviors. In general, hamsters are somewhat solitary and shy, but with time and patience they will bond with their guardians and enjoy attention, interaction, and even gentle handling. The key is to take it slowly! Some tips for building a relationship with your hamster include:

- Let them adjust to their new home without forced interaction for several days
- Place your hand in their cage briefly and allow them to approach and sniff at their own pace
- Offer small treats by hand, let them approach, do not chase!
- Once comfortable with your presence, you can try a gentle touch
- Progress to coaxing them onto your hand, or gently scooping them up while in the cage
- When they appear comfortable with in-cage handling, move to outside of the cage
- A frightened hamster will jump, so make sure to be sitting down when handling them
- Remember to take it slow!

Some hamsters will be social butterflies while others may never care for handling, so it is important to respect their individuality. But if you give them lots of love and attention, you will become fast friends who enjoy each other's company and companionship.