



ANIMAL ANTICS

Hamsters as Pets



Background - Hamsters are mammals that belong to the rodent family having large incisor teeth that are continually growing necessitating gnawing to prevent the teeth from overgrowing. The word 'rodent' is derived from the latin word 'rodere' which means 'to gnaw'. Most species of hamsters have expandable cheek pouches in which they can carry food and bedding back to their burrow where they will store food. The word 'hamster' comes from the German word 'hamster' which means 'to hoard'.

Hamsters have a lifespan of 1-3 years and form the Family Cricetidae which is broken down into different Genera including Cricetulus, Phodopus and Calomyscus. Within each Genera are various species of hamster. There are many different species of hamsters throughout the world and most hamsters inhabit semi-desert areas where they live in burrows. These burrows consist of many tunnels and separate chambers including chambers where the hamster will store food and sleep. Popular pet breeds are Syrian, Dwarf, Russian Dwarf, Chinese & Winter White Russian (Siberian).

Hamsters make good family pets as they need very little space, and are easy to look after. They are nocturnal and therefore like to hide away during the day, but will come out to play in the evening. Well looked after hamsters are quite happy living on their own, and it's actually best to keep Syrian hamsters singularly. Both males and females will fight if kept together, so if you want to keep more than one animal it's probably better to consider dwarf hamsters or gerbils.

Housing - Hamsters need a lot of exercise, so buy the biggest cage that you can afford. Plastic or metal cages are best, since wooden ones will be gnawed and splinters can damage the hamsters pouch. Modular stacking systems such as Rotostak provide lots of interest and fun for pet and owner alike, and have the advantage that extra rooms can be added to make them larger. The floor of the cage should be covered in woodchip or shredded paper, but hay and shredded dishcloth products should be avoided as they can become tangled around hamster's legs cutting off the blood flow and necessitating limb amputation. Hamster cages should be cleaned once a week with hot water and a pet safe disinfectant. Hamsters naturally divide their accommodation into eating, sleeping, bathroom and play areas.

Feeding - Hamsters in the wild are omnivores and will eat a wide variety of food. However, a dry hamster mix or pellets will provide all the minerals, vitamins and nutrients required. Hamsters will hoard their food and, therefore, fresh fruit, carrot, lettuce or cabbage should be fed by hand so that you know it has been eaten and not hoarded away where it can rot. Mineral blocks and the occasional chew treat are popular, and the latter can be used to help tame your hamster. Food bowls should be sturdy and hard to tip over as the hamster will climb into them. They should be gnaw-proof and easy to clean. Remove uneaten food and wash the bowl daily. Similarly, a water bottle and drinking tube should be provided and cleaned and refreshed daily.

Play - Hamsters like to exercise daily and if provided with a wheel, or a ball, can run the equivalent of 4 to 8 miles in an evening! However, you should restrict usage as your hamster can become exhausted if over exercised. Play should also be borne in mind when choosing where to locate their cage, as levels of activity can easily disturb human sleep, especially that of a child.

Handling - When you get a new hamster, leave him alone for the first couple of days, to allow him to adjust to his new surroundings. After that it's important to handle him regularly to build up a relationship. Hamsters are renowned for having very poor vision, so before picking him up, talk to him first and let him get used to your voice. Then introduce your hand so that he can become used to your smell. Finally pick him up very gently by cupping one hand under him and one over him. Children should be supervised when handling hamsters and must take great care not to drop them. Eventually he should come to you and eat out of your hand.

Health - Hamsters normally stay healthy throughout their lives. However, two complaints which can generally be avoided by correct husbandry are:-

1. **Colds.** If your hamster's coat appears ruffled, he loses his appetite, coughs and sneezes and has a nasal discharge, he probably has a cold. Keep him warm, and if signs persist contact your veterinary practitioner. Hamsters can catch colds from humans, so avoid handling if you have one. Colds can be avoided by keeping the cage away from draughts, and providing plenty of bedding.
2. **Wet Tail.** Hamsters are susceptible to severe diarrhoea known as Wet Tail, which always requires immediate veterinary treatment. It can be caused by rotten or mouldy food or bedding, or brought on by stress, such as over handling a new hamster. In mild cases of diarrhoea, fruit and vegetables should be withheld for a few days.

Teeth - Hamster's teeth grow constantly throughout life, and if they get too long, can prevent the hamster from chewing properly. Hamster treats, apple tree wood and mineral stones all help him wear his teeth down.

Never let a hamster out of its cage unsupervised, as they like to chew things, especially electric cables!

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