



HAMSTER CARE GUIDE

Hamsters come in all sorts of colors and varieties:

- Syrian hamsters or “teddy bear”, also marketed by other names depending on the color (eg: Panda Bear hamster, Fancy, Golden, etc.)
 - long haired, short haired, hairless, or “satin” haired
- Dwarf hamsters, including Campbell's Russian Dwarf, Winter White, and Roborovski
- Chinese hamsters, which are not dwarf hamsters, and have distinguishably longer tails

All hamsters, no matter the type, do share common needs. This document is designed to give you the best suggestions we have based on collective years of rescuing hamsters so that you and your new hammie friend can be as healthy and happy as can be!

A. HOUSING

1. Hamsters and Other Hamsters

Most hamsters are not social animals at all, and even if they appear to get along at first, this will inevitably lead to fighting, certain injury, and possible death! All hamsters can live very happy lives as solitary creatures. Syrian and Chinese hamsters **must live alone** and should never be housed together beyond 5 weeks of age. Some Dwarf hamsters of the **same species and sex** can be paired, but they must be from the same litter, have grown up together, and have compatible personalities as well. When in doubt, it is always best to keep each hamster in a separate habitat.

2. Tanks and Cages

Despite what you may see in a pet store, adult hamsters require a minimum of 450 sq in of unbroken floor space - much more than your typical 10 gallon tank! Larger species like Syrians and Chinese will do better with at least 600 sq in of floor space. There are a few different ways to achieve these dimensions:

- **Glass Aquariums.** A 40 gallon long or breeder tank (or larger) with a lid makes a great home for a hamster. Aquariums are easily cleaned, great for viewing, and difficult to escape, but the major downside is ventilation.
- **Wire Cages.** Hamsters do enjoy climbing the walls, but they can be easier to escape--make sure the bar spacing is small enough (½ inch spacing or smaller)! One major con that lots of hamster owners face with wire cages is the possibility of wire chewing, which is not only dangerous for the hamster but also very loud and bothersome for the owner. If you opt for a wire cage do keep an eye on this behavior to avoid your hamster harming itself or escaping in any way. A couple of specific cages we recommend are the [Prevue 528](#), [CrittterTrail Super Habitat](#), or [Savic Mickey XL](#). You can also purchase a cage designed for guinea pigs or rabbits and wrap with ½” chicken wire to hamster-proof.

- **Bin Cages.** For a budget-friendly option, try making your own cage! You can begin with any plastic bin that is at least 15" high, has a secure lid, and has a dimensions of 30"x15" or more. From there, [follow a guide](#) that provides step-by-step instructions for adding escape-proof ventilation.

B. BEDDING

Your hamster will need to have a safe, absorbent layer of bedding in the bottom of the cage. While there are many different types of bedding or litter sold in stores, a few of them are very unsafe to use with any small animal, including hamsters!

The 4 types of bedding that should NEVER be used are pine, cedar, corn cob, and clay/cat litter. Any of these options can cause serious respiratory problems, leading to severe illness or death. In addition, corn cob bedding can grow fungus quickly (which causes respiratory AND urinary/kidney infections) and cat litter or clay litter can cause blockages if ingested.

We also recommend avoiding "nesting cotton" that you may see in the hamster section in pet stores. This material could get stuck in their cheek pouches, around their teeth, in their intestines, and cause strangulation.

Types of bedding that we DO recommend are:

- **Aspen shavings.** Aspen is a soft wood, but is much less aromatic--and therefore much less problematic--than pine or cedar.
- **Unscented paper bedding.** Bedding such as Carefresh is made from recycled softwood pulp. It is softer than wood shavings, and much more absorbent. It will be safely broken down and passed in the case that your hamster accidentally consumes this bedding. Carefresh also comes in Carefresh Ultra, which is bleached white, and said to be more absorbent and better at neutralizing odors from urine and feces.
- **Yesterday's News or other pelleted paper litter.** Hamsters in general do not prefer to sleep on this litter, but it is an excellent litter to use in litter pans and in the corners of the cage where the hamster is likely to urinate and defecate. This is made from recycled paper, and packed into pellet form. It is not as soft as Carefresh or wood shavings, but this litter is highly absorbent, and leaves the cage virtually odor-free.

With whatever bedding you choose, be sure to put a layer on the bottom of the cage 3-6" deep, as your hamster will dig, burrow, and hide food within the bedding. Bedding should be spot cleaned weekly and fully changed monthly. Failure to do so can result in mold growing in your hamster's urine, bad smells, illnesses such as wet tail in Syrians, and all around unpleasant conditions. Make sure that when you change your hamster's bedding, you also clean out and sterilize your hamster's accessories, toys, and cage. Use a mild soap and hot water, a very diluted bleach/water solution (one part bleach to 10 parts water), or a 50/50 white vinegar and water solution to disinfect and clean the cage and all accessories, including the water bottle. Always make sure that everything is thoroughly rinsed before allowing your hamster to come into contact with it again.

C. ACCESSORIES

1. Water

Hamsters should be given unlimited access to fresh, clean drinking water. It is highly recommended that you use a glass or plastic "sipper" tube that hangs by a wire either inside or outside (in most wire cages) of the cage. Having the water bottle on the outside can prevent the hamster from chewing the water bottle. Be sure that this water is replaced daily, and that the ball bearing inside the sipper tube is clear and free from any obstructions.

Using a water dish is never suitable, because the water can be easily contaminated with urine or feces, tipped over by the hamster causing the bedding to get soaked, or result in a very wet, unhappy, and cold hamster. More seriously, younger and smaller hamsters can run the risk of drowning in the water dish, so it is much easier and safer to use a sipper tube for drinking purposes.

2. Wheel

Hamsters are very active little creatures, who enjoy plenty of exercise on a wheel, especially at night. Syrians are more nocturnal than dwarves, so it is not uncommon to see your dwarf awake and running on his wheel for a while during the daytime, whereas it is less common to see a Syrian exercising during the day. Most hamsters run an average of 5-10 miles per night, so it is very important to provide a wheel at all times for exercise.

Wheels come in all different sizes and styles, but it is important to buy a solid wheel rather than a wheel with wire rungs. The rungs can cause injury to the feet and legs if they get caught in the wheel while spinning--not to mention the possible development of bumblefoot. The size of your wheel will vary by species: larger species (Syrians and Chinese) should have 10-14" wheels, while smaller hamsters (Dwarves) can use an 8-12" wheel. If the hamster's back is curved while running, the wheel is too small! When in doubt, bigger is always better; Roborovskis are the only species that might struggle with a huge wheel.

3. Hideout

Hamsters need a place where they can sleep and hide in relative privacy and security. Most hamsters will make a few nests throughout the cage, as they like to move their nests around quite a bit, but if the hamster has a nice, secure "house" to nest in, they usually favor this spot and are less likely to sleep in other places. Hamsters are naturally prey animals, and in the wild they will dig burrows into the ground to sleep in. They have a natural instinct for wanting to hide when they sleep, so providing a safe nesting spot or "house" is imperative.

Make sure that house is big enough for the type of hamster that you have, as obviously Syrian hamsters will need bigger houses than dwarves. You can purchase plastic or wooden hides at a pet store, cloth cubes from some shops that make rodent hammocks, or even DIY it with cardboard boxes, popsicle stick huts, or dollar store bins and baskets.

4. Other Toys

You always want to make sure that your hamster has something other than the wheel to amuse themselves with. There is virtually no limit as to what your hamster will find amusing, and there are hundreds of different toys and accessories at pet stores. You should purchase a wide variety and change up what is in their cage often to keep the layout interesting.

In addition to these toys that you can purchase at pet stores, you can also give your hamster cardboard tubes from paper towel or toilet paper rolls. They will love to run around and hide and even chew these tubes. You can also collect several of these tubes and arrange them in mazes for the hamster to run around in. Hamsters also like to play in empty tissue boxes, empty paper bags, and any other clean, safe containers. Some other ideas include bendy bridges, wooden tunnels, climbing rope/ladders, willow balls or rolling toys, DIY treat balls and toys, baby rings, hanging bird toys, play n' shapes cardboard hides for climbing, cardboard mazes, and so much more. Take care to avoid anything that will bear sharp edges or points when chewed, and if your hamster does chew on something that creates sharp edges, throw it out, and replace it with a new one. Be creative, as you will be surprised at what your hamster will do with ordinary objects!

Hamsters' teeth never stop growing, so it is very important that they also always have something to chew on in their cage. It is ideal to provide a variety of different textures for stimulation. Any small animal chews that do not contain hay will work (hay is fine as a stand alone, just not incorporated in treats), such as wood blocks, willow and apple chews, lava chews, and more.

5. Food Dish

Hamsters should always have a readily accessible, plentiful supply of food. This food is best kept in a heavy, ceramic, chew- and spill-proof bowl or container. Many pet stores carry inexpensive, hard plastic food dishes as well. There really is no difference in these, save for that the ceramic types are usually sturdier and harder for the hamster to tip over. This is the least important item in the cage, as some hamster owners like to cater to the hamster's natural desire to forage and sprinkle the food around the cage in small amounts. More important is what goes in the food dish:

D. FOOD & SNACKS

Your hamster is a very robust little animal, with dwarves eating just as much as Syrians, which usually equals about a tablespoon of food a day. Some hamsters will eat more or less, depending on size and metabolism. Your hamster will appear to eat more than he or she actually does, because of the tendency to hoard. A good rule of thumb is to offer a small handful daily, discarding the leftover food from the day before, because your hamster could have sat in his/her food bowl and soiled the leftover food. Your hamster should have the following foods offered to them daily:

- **High Quality Dry Mix**

Most commercially prepared hamster foods contain a high amount of corn, sunflower seeds, and other fillers like peas and wheat middlings. While these aren't necessarily bad for the hamster, they are not ideal to make up the majority of the diet. The ideal food mix will contain a variety of seeds, nuts, grains, vegetables, protein, and fruits. Look at the package, and read the ingredients. If extra sugar or high amounts of corn and alfalfa pellets and sunflower seeds are added, it is probably not a good choice. You may choose to feed a lab block in addition to the seed mix as well for a complete diet. Some good choices for food mixes, which are available at most pet stores include:

- Seed mixes
 - Higgins Sunburst or Vita Garden
 - VitaKraft Vita Smart
 - PURE Hamster Food
 - Kaytee Fiesta
 - Tiny Friends
- Lab Blocks
 - Mazuri Rat & Mouse
 - Envigo/Teklad
 - Kaytee Forti Diet

- **Fresh Foods**

It is imperative that you also offer your hamster a small amount of greens or vegetables a few times a week. Small amounts of fruit should be offered weekly, as they contain natural sugar. A lot of food mixes offer dehydrated carrots and other vegetables in the mix, but fresh foods help your hamster's digestive system and help keep your hamster hydrated.

Foods that should **NEVER** be fed include:

Tomatoes, potato "eyes" (the green stuff that grows on potatoes), any kind of citrus fruit, garlic, raw kidney beans, apple seeds, grape seeds, kiwi, or iceberg lettuce.

Foods that are **SAFE** to feed include:

Apples, bananas, beans, broccoli, carrots, cabbage, clover, cauliflower, celery, dandelions, cucumber (small amounts), romaine lettuce, zucchini, spinach, potatoes, green peas, squash, sweet potato, turnips, fresh (never canned) peaches or pears, strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, grapes, fresh melon (honeydew or cantaloupe), kale, watercress, timothy grass, or lentils.

If you are unsure of something, it is better to stay on the safe side and not offer it! Make sure that you remove any uneaten fruits or vegetables from the cage, and check to see that they have not hoarded any, as these will rot, and can make your hamster sick!

- **Treats**

Any of the above mentioned foods are good to give as occasional treats, but remember to use them in moderation, as your hamster may cut down on the amount of his/her regular food mix in favor of the "treats". Dwarf hamsters are especially prone to diabetes, so fruit or other high-sugar treats should be offered rarely if ever.

E. TAMING AND HANDLING

The first rule in making sure your hamster will trust you and learn to be comfortable with you is to build up trust with your hamster from day one and keep the hamster's stress level to a minimum. For the first 2 days your hamster is in his/her new environment, do not attempt to pick the hamster up, and let them acclimate to their new surroundings. This will ensure that the first time you attempt to hold and pet your hamster, that he/she will not be at a high stress level.

A few steps to hamster-taming success:

1. Never startle or wake your hamster up! The hamster will probably react by getting defensive, which can mean that they will roll over onto their backs and flail their legs and arms around, or bite. Subsequently, your hamster will associate the scent of you to fear, which is not a good way to start off.
2. Have clean hands. If you have any food, lotion, or anything else scented on your hands, your hamster might smell the last thing you ate and think you are giving them a treat. Hamsters have very poor eyesight, and rely mainly on their sense of smell. Give the hamster time to smell you while they cannot reach you. Never jerk your hand away quickly, as this will startle your hamster. Let your hamster sniff you until they are done.
3. Stroke them gently. Once you have established that your hamster is awake, and is okay with your presence, slowly stroke the hamster with one finger on the top of their head or back. Your hamster will react by sniffing your finger.
4. Pick them up. After your hamster is used to your scent, you can try to pick them up by a few different methods: You can lower your hand to the cage floor, and allow your hamster to walk on your hand and slowly raise them up, or you can lure them into a cup or a scoop with a tidbit of food to slowly and gently scoop your hamster up and let them walk onto your hand from there. Only after your hamster is very used to being held by you, and is very docile while doing so, do we suggest trying to pick your hamster up directly, that is without letting them make all of the advances.
5. Cradle your hamster. When you have your hamster in your hands, make sure that you cradle their lower body with your hand and hold them close to your chest so they feel secure. Sit down in a closed room, like in the bathtub or your bed, to reduce the chances that they will jump or fall.
6. Let them explore. Once you have your hamster used to being held by you, you can allow them to "explore", by letting them crawl on your lap, or on your bed, or even up your shoulders (be sure that you keep a ready hand in case they start to fall). Most hamsters are very inquisitive, and will be sort of "squirmy" so put one hand in front of the other as they walk, kind of like making a never-ending staircase with your hands

Once your hamster can successfully do all of the above without getting defensive and scared, you have successfully hand tamed your hamster. Remember that it takes patience; confidence is not built up in one day, so make sure that you interact with your hamster on a daily basis so they will remain friendly with you. If your hamster is hesitant in allowing you to hold them, repeat the above steps slowly, not proceeding to the next step until they have mastered the previous step. As with most other animals, a tasty bribe can usually help them make progress as well!

F. PLAYTIME

All hamsters need roughly 20-30 minutes of monitored exercise outside of their cage every day. This can mean letting them have free run of a room that has been "hamster proofed" (picking up stuff off the floor that they can get into, sealing any escape routes, and ensuring there are no exposed wires for them to chew), purchasing or DIY-ing a playpen, or using the bathtub/bathroom or bed. The play area should include their toys, hides, the wheel, etc. for them to explore and climb on top of. We recommend avoiding hamster balls; these often just stress out hamsters and can cause injuries when their toes get caught in the air slits. It is fine to have one as a backup or for use if you travel with your hamster, but it should not be used very often.

Playtime is also a great bonding opportunity for you and your hamster. They must be watched to stay out of trouble and, if you stay in the play area with them, they also tend to explore and climb onto you. You can feed them treats, set up a treat scavenger hunt, and get them used to your presence.

G. POTTY TRAINING

To ensure your hamster's cage is cleaner on a daily basis, you can potty train your hamster. Simply buy a hamster potty from the pet store or use a crock/bowl and place it in a corner of the cage that you think is right, or find the spot that your hamster has already begun urinating and defecating on. Ensure that the potty is big enough for the hamster to get in, turn around and get out without any difficulty. Gather a small quantity of litter that your hamster has already urinated on and place it inside his new toilet, along with a different type of "potty" litter that you may want to use - children's play sand, Yesterday's News, or other small animal litter. Eventually, your hamster will get the hang of using this potty or litter box, and use it on a regular basis.

H. TRICKS

The first and most basic trick to teach your hamster is to get them to respond to their name. All you have to do is use a higher pitched or sing-song voice when you call your hamster, and always have a small tidbit ready to feed, and they will soon associate the sound of you calling them with getting a treat. After a while, it is no longer necessary to offer a treat each time, but they will still come when you call them.

Next, an easy trick to teach is "say please". The idea of this trick is to get the hamster to come up on their hind legs when offering a treat. The way to do this is to hold out to the hamster a small treat such as a sunflower seed when you call them, and hold it a bit higher, just out of their reach, and say "say please". The hamster will raise up on his/her hind legs to get the treat. If your hamster has done this successfully, allow them to take the treat. If they do not raise up, do not give them the treat. The hamster will associate the sound of you saying "say please" and raising up, with getting a treat, and will thus do this every time.

Teaching these tricks are not necessary, but they provide a good opportunity to create a bond with your hamster, and spend time with them.

I. GROOMING

Hamsters are very clean animals, and they do a wonderful job of cleaning themselves. There is no need to give your hamster a bath, as not only will it stress them out because they are afraid of water, but it will also rinse away natural coatings of oils, which can lead to skin and fur itchiness and hair loss. Hamsters can also drown very easily if water gets in their nose or mouth, so avoid water at all costs, unless it is absolutely necessary, such as to remove something from the skin or fur that accidentally got there, such as a spill, etc.

While hamsters shouldn't have *wet* baths, they should get *dust* baths! Providing a dust bath is **mandatory for dwarf hamsters** and a nice-to-have for others. You should offer the hamster a small dish of chinchilla sand (not chinchilla dust! This is too fine and can irritate your hamster's lungs) to roll around in. This will get rid of any excess oils that can cause your hamster to look dirty.

Hamsters do not need to be brushed, as they will do this themselves too, but if you have a long haired Syrian hamster you may want to brush his/her fur gently with a soft bristled toothbrush or even a doll's brush. Not only will this groom your hamster and remove any bedding that may be tangled in their fur, but it will also relax and feel good to the hamster, and is a good way to spend more time bonding with your hamster.

J. HEALTH

When hamsters are healthy, they will have clear eyes and skin and coats, which will be smooth and sheen, not ruffled or dull. The hamster should have good posture, be able to use all of their limbs without dragging any of them, and have good, straight teeth that are not visible when the hamster's mouth isn't open. The hamster's nose should not be runny, and you should always check the hamster's bottom, droppings, and urine to make sure that the hamster's bottom is dry, the droppings are firm, and the urine is clear with no blood. Make sure your hamster does not have any strange bumps or abscesses on their body or limbs.

Make sure that you check your hamster for any signs of illness regularly. You should find a vet for your hamster that specializes in exotics. Remember, never try to diagnose and treat an illness on your own without first consulting a vet. It is also a good idea to take your hamster in for a yearly check-up, where the vet will test the hamster's urine and feces, and do a complete physical exam, and can even trim your hamster's teeth or nails for you. This is very important, even though the vet's bills will be more than you likely paid for your hamster, but as the saying goes, "If you can't afford the vet, you can't afford the pet!"

K. LINKS

Links to helpful websites:

<https://californiahamsterassociation.com/>

<http://www.hamster-club.com/>

<http://www.exoticpetvet.com/hamster-care.html>

<https://www.youtube.com/c/MunchiesPlace/videos>

<https://www.youtube.com/c/VictoriaRaechel/>