

Hamster Care

The Golden (also known as Syrian) hamster is a small rodent, with today's UK pet Golden hamsters originating from hamsters first bred in Jerusalem. Chinese and Russian hamsters are smaller and generally more social species. These hamsters are popular pets due to their lack of mal odour, but are generally nocturnal and may bite, so should be handled carefully. This care sheet will concentrate on the care of Golden hamsters but similar care is required for the others.

Longevity:

- Hamsters can live between 1.5 - 2 years if looked after correctly. The average lifespan in a recent study was 21 months (O'Neill et al. (2022) "Demography, disorders and mortality of pet hamsters under primary veterinary care in the UK in 2016" Journal of Small Animal Practice).

Sociability:

- Golden hamsters should be housed singly.
- Chinese and Russian species can be more social so may be kept in pairs or single sex groups but should be monitored carefully for signs of fighting. Fighting is more likely if your enclosure is too small.

Environment

- Many of the houses sold commercially specifically for hamsters are too small. These animals in the wild can have territories of several kilometres and you should aim to provide as large an enclosure as possible. The enclosure should be well ventilated, with a deep layer of substrate to allow burrowing behaviour. Hamsters are good climbers so keep this in mind and take steps to avoid injury when designing their housing.
- Saw dust/shavings are very dusty and can aggravate their lungs and respiratory systems so substrate such as dust free natural paper-based beddings are more suitable, absorbable and easy to clean.
- A nest box should also be provided as a retreat, with paper or hay bedding. Cotton wool should **not** be used as bedding material as this can be easily impacted in cheek pouches.
- Hamsters are very active and inquisitive animals so wheels and toys should be provided within the cage. However, be aware that toys may be quickly destroyed, so replaceable cardboard rolls and boxes often provide the best entertainment. Wheels should also be of a solid type and large enough size to prevent injuries.
- Temperature ideally should be kept between 18-26 degrees celsius and the enclosure kept out of direct sunlight as enclosures will easily overheat.
- The enclosure should be cleaned out fully at least once a week to help avoid disease, with special attention paid to cleaning the nest box, as hamsters often hoard food there.

Environmental Enrichment

- Regular exercise outside the enclosure is recommended, but this must be well-supervised to prevent injury or escape. Exercise balls should **not be used** as we now know that these are very stressful for hamsters which, as a prey species, do not like to be exposed in open spaces without the ability to hide.
- Environmental enrichment which provides your pet with an opportunity to express some normal behaviours is an important component of good husbandry that enriches your pet's life. Behaviours such as exploration, digging and burrowing, or foraging for food can make for a healthier happier hamster. Chewing and gnawing are also important, and help to wear down the front teeth. Search for environmental enrichment ideas online and see what you can create which will provide stimulation and exercise for your pet.

Diet

- Muesli mixes are **not** appropriate food as they promote selective feeding which results in an unbalanced diet. Pelleted diets are much healthier and are readily available. Water should always be freely available via a drinking bottle and changed daily.

Preventative healthcare

- We recommend regular veterinary health checks for pet hamsters as medical problems are more easily treated if detected at an early stage – you can register for automatic reminders by contacting our Beaumont Sainsbury Animal Hospital reception team: (<https://www.rvc.ac.uk/small-animal-vet/general-practice>).

Insurance

- We highly recommend that you take out a pet insurance policy to provide piece of mind in an accident or emergency.

Common health complaints

- The most common problems encountered in hamsters are 'wet tail' or diarrhoea, overgrown teeth or nails, abdominal masses and traumatic injuries/ bites from other hamsters, so make sure your hamster lives and exercises in safe spaces.

A recent study by the RVC that explored the health records of almost 4000 hamsters identified their most common health problems.

O'Neill et al. (2022) "Demography, disorders and mortality of pet hamsters under primary veterinary care in the UK in 2016" Journal of Small Animal Practice.

The full paper can be accessed for free here: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jsap.13527>.

