

Evergreen Avian & Exotic Animal Hospital

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Hamster FAQs

-Cathy A. Johnson-Delaney, DVM



The Syrian hamster is the most common hamster as a pet. Dwarf hamsters are different genus' and species. This information sheet is for the Syrian (*Mesocricetus auratus*) hamster. The Syrian hamster comes in mainly two coat lengths: the short or wild-type (standard) and the long haired or "teddy bear" type. Colors range from white to a very deep gold.

Behavior: Hamsters are nocturnal and when wakened during the day can be quite grumpy. Awaken a hamster slowly, and wait until the hamster has assumed normal posture before trying to pick it up. When first awakened

many will whip around and bear the teeth – they are prone to nip if picking up is tried with this posture. Hamsters are very active during the night and may run for hours in an exercise wheel. Hamsters make nests and will carry pieces of paper towel or tissue into their nests. They also carry food in their cheek pouches back to the nests for deposition. Hamsters may deposit and hoard food all over the cage. Watching the amount of droppings is more indicative of how much they eat rather than watching the food bowl contents disappear. They are latrine animals and tend to urinate primarily in one corner of the cage. Any wetted bedding should be removed on a daily basis to prevent the buildup of ammonia which can be detrimental to the hamster's health. Feces may be found all over the cage. Hamsters that are handled daily tend to become very gentle and unlikely to bite.

Diet: A commercial fortified rodent block or kibble should be the basis of the diet. Diets should not be seed-based as the hamster tends to pick out and eat only the sunflower seeds, leading to a suboptimal nutritional state and in some instances overgrowth of the incisors. An example of this type of kibble is Oxbow's Healthy Handfuls diet. Small treats of greens or sprouts (1/2 teaspoon) several times a week can be given. Sunflower or pumpkin seeds 2-3 seeds can be given as a treat several times a week. Treats should not be fruits, sweetened yogurt-type candy, or seed sticks. Fresh water via a sipper tube should be available always. As hamsters tend to stash and hoard food, frequent nest and cage sites should be checked frequently with excess food removed. This is particularly important if fresh foods are given – unless eaten on the spot the material can spoil if it is stashed. Grasses and hays can be used in the cage in small amounts and kibble hidden in it to encourage foraging.

Housing: Hamsters may be housed in a great variety of caging, preferably wire and open-aired. Enclosed "habitat" caging is not good due to the lack of good ventilation. Lack of ventilation contributes to ammonia buildup from the urine, which irritates skin and the respiratory tract. An exercise wheel should be provided. Food dishes should be heavy enough that the hamster cannot dump it. A sipper tube water bottle should be available always with fresh water. Bedding under the bottle that gets wet should be removed daily. A small dish under the sipper tube may help catch drips.

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Bedding can be of recycled newspaper (shreds or pellets) which is preferred, or hard wood shavings. Paper towel pieces, facial tissue, and hay can be provided for the hamster to make a nest out of. The nest should be investigated daily and foods removed (particularly if fresh) to prevent spoilage. The latrine area (wetted bedding) should be removed daily.

Quick Facts:

Physiologic	
Life Span	18-24 months (record 3 yrs)
Adult male body weight	85-130 g
Adult female body weight	95-150 g
Rectal body temperature	101-103 degrees F
Diploid number	44
Food consumption	> 15g/100g/day
Water consumption	> 20 ml/100 g/day
Respiratory rate	35-135 / min
Heart Rate	250-500/min
Blood volume	78 ml/kg
Blood pressure	150/100 mm Hg
Dentition	Open rooted (grow continuously) incisors. Molars (cheek teeth) do not grow.
Puberty (male)	45-75 days
Breeding onset (male)	10-14 weeks old
Breeding onset (female)	May be mature at 35-42 days, but first breeding should be withheld until adult weight. Consider 610 weeks old
Estrous (heat cycle)	4 days (polyestrous)
Gestation period	15-18 days
Cycling description	polyestrous
Postpartum estrus	Infertile Fertile estrus follows weaning by 2-18 days
Litter size	5-9
Birth weight	2 g
Weaning age	20-25 days
Breeding duration (commercial)	10-12 months (5-7 litters)
Milk composition	12.0%fat, 9.0% protein, 3.4% lactose

Breeding and Raising Young:

As estrus nears, thin mucus may be seen from the female's vulva. The morning following estrus, an opaque, stringy mucus will appear. During early evening, a receptive female will approach a male in a non-belligerent manner, which indicates mating probability. The hand-mating system is preferred to prevent fighting. The female is placed into the male's cage 1 hour before dark and the pair observed for mating activity or fighting. The male is removed following either outcome. After mating, the female should not have any discharge. Pregnancy is indicated by weight gain and abdominal distention at 10 days. At day 13 after mating, the female should be supplied with a week's supply of food, bedding, and water, then the cage should not be disturbed. The female becomes active, restless and has slight vaginal bleeding prior to delivery. Litter abandonment and cannibalism are fairly common if the female is disturbed or stressed. Do not disturb for at least 1 week after birth. Make small water tube available to babies at this time (move sipper tube low). Fostering and hand-raising are rarely successful.

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