

Evergreen Avian & Exotic Animal Hospital

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Gerbil Faqs

-Cathy A. Johnson-Delaney, DVM

The domestic (Mongolian) gerbil's Latin name is *Meriones unguiculatus*. They are illegal in the state of California. Coat color can range from white to black, with the most common color a sandy brown.

Behavior: Gerbils are friendly and rarely bite. Most are diurnal in activity, although some seem primarily nocturnal. They are diggers and burrowers and should be housed on deep bedding. They may emit a soft "chirp" as a vocalization. They are social if raised together from puphood, but adults introduced to each other may fight (even to the death). Large groups established before puberty will often live together comfortably if not overcrowded, but its best to separate the sexes unless breeding is desired. Most common for pets seem to be a pair of same sexed individuals. Females may be more aggressive fighters than males. Gerbils are territorial and both genders produce a yellow-brown musty-smelling secretion (scent marking) from a gland located on the stomach near the umbilicus. They also mark territory with urine and feces. 20% of gerbils exhibit brief (few seconds to a minute) epileptic-type seizures following handling or other stressful experience. No treatment is necessary. Foot-drumming is general communication/alerting/excitement.

Diet: Commercial rodent pellets with 18-22% protein are recommended (Example: Mazuri Rodent Diet or Oxbow Pet Products Healthy Handfuls). Because gerbils selectively eat only sunflower seeds, seed-based feed mixes do not provide adequate nutrition (fractures, growth, bone development problems result). Gerbils conserve water by concentrating their urine, and drink very little, especially if they receive some leafy greens as a diet supplement. Fresh water via a sipper tube should be always available. Young gerbils may begin sampling solid food at day 15 of age. For the pups, provide soft, small-sized pellets within reach and a small sipper tube with water.

Housing:

Use wire, steel, aluminum or heavy plastic enclosures as they can chew their way out of wood enclosures. Aquariums are often used for gerbils with a secure, wire-meshed lid. Moisture, urine, feces can build-up however, so ventilation is more difficult in the aquarium housing. Bedding can be hardwood shavings, but recycled newspaper based beddings are recommended, to the depth of 2-3 inches. The enclosure should be cleaned at least weekly, with any buildup of wetted bedding, or soiled with feces should be removed even on a daily basis. Avoid sand, corncob or cat litter as bedding. Provide cardboard rolls or box for hiding, an exercise wheel, and cleaned natural branch or small piece of hardwood for chewing. Temperature ideal is 60-70 degrees F, with a maximum relative humidity at 30-50%. A 12/12 light/dark cycle is adequate.

Preventive Care: Good husbandry and sanitation. Use bedding that will not cause nose ulceration or irritation when the gerbil burrows (i.e. don't use sand, corncob, cat litter). Offer good quality formulated rodent pellets.

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Quick Facts:

Physiologic	
Life Span	3-5 yr (females longer than males)
Adult male body weight	65-100 g
Adult female body weight	55-85 g
Rectal body temperature	37-39 degrees C
Diploid number	44
Food consumption	5-8 g/100 g body weight/day depends on moisture in food
Water consumption	4-7 ml/100 g body weight/day or more – depends on moisture content of food
Respiratory rate	90-140/minute
Heart Rate	250-500/minute
Blood volume	6.6-7.8 ml/100 g body weight
Breeding onset (male)	70-85 d of age
Breeding onset (female)	65-85 d of age
Estrous (heat cycle)	4-6 days (polyestrus)
Mating	Evenings
Implantation	May be delayed during lactation
Ovulation	Spontaneous
Gestation period	27-48 days
Cycling description	Polyestrus
Postpartum estrus	Fertile
Litter size	3-7 (avg 5) pups
Birth weight	2.5-3.5 grams (larger in small litters)
Weaning age	21-24 days (3.3-6.0 grams)
Breeding duration (commercial)	12-17 months (4-10 litters)

Breeding and Raising Young:

Gerbils will breed all year with a controlled 12-14 hours daylight. Best to maintain breeding population as monogamous pairs. Polygamous harems can be successful if formed before the gerbils are 8 weeks of age, but they still might fight. Young are born naked, hair begins at 6 days, with good coat at 10 days of age. Eyes open at 16-20 days. The male can be kept with the dam and pups. Infertile matings may be followed by a pseudopregnance lasting 14-16 days. The female may destroy a litter if it is very small or if she stops lactating. This may be a wild, survival behavior – the next mating/litter may be normal number of young. A dam may desert her litter or even cannibalize it if she is disturbed, overcrowded or ill. Most females are fairly reliable mothers. Fostering abandone pups is possible if a host dam has a litter of similar age.