

# Hamsters

Hamsters are short tailed nocturnal small rodents that come from desert environments. Several genera are seen as pets: Golden (Syrian), Chinese (striped) and Russian (Hairy footed or Djungarian). The commonest pet species is the Golden and these are all derived from just 3 individuals imported into the UK in 1931. In the wild they live a solitary existence in deep burrows with large grain stores. Generally pet Golden hamsters are kept singly to prevent fighting. Mutations have led to the development of a variety of coat colours and a longhaired coat. The smaller Chinese & Russian hamsters are becoming increasingly popular, as they seem to be less aggressive. In the wild these dwarf hamsters tend to live as family groups and can be kept as pairs as pets. Hamsters as pets are relatively odourless and have simple needs. However they can bite and will gnaw through cages. All hamsters have a relatively short life span. Hamsters have large cheek pouches and can carry large quantities of food in them. Males have large testicles, which stick out backwards either side of the tail. They also have dark coloured glands on each flank. Both of these masculine features are commonly mistaken for tumours. Hamster's front long incisor teeth continue to grow throughout life, but the cheek teeth do not. The information given relates to the Golden hamster.

## *Biology*

- Average Lifespan: 1.5-3 years
- Average Weight: 85-140g (Males) 95-120g (Females)
- Sexual Maturity Males: 6-8 weeks or 80-120g weight
- Females: 4 w or 80-120g (unresponsive until 8-12 w - 14 w Chinese)
- Average Gestation: 15-18 days (21 d Chinese)
- Average Litter Size: 4-12
- Weaned: 20-25 days
- Body Temperature: 99-101 F
- Respiration Rate: 35-135 per minute
- Pulse Rate: 250-500 per minute

## *Choosing a pet*

Avoid purchasing any pet that appears ill, quiet or depressed. Hamsters should be bright and alert, and move quickly when startled. Beware of pets with closed eyes or discharges from the eyes or nose. Check the mouth for drooling saliva or wetness to the fur, this may indicate badly positioned premolar (cheek) teeth. If possible, examine the incisor (front) teeth and make sure they are not overgrown or digging into the lips or gums. You should be able to feel the ribs with just a small amount of fat over them. Check the anal area for diarrhoea, soiling or moistness, which might indicate a gastrointestinal infection. The skin should have an even coat of fur and no signs of scratching or wounds. A good pet shop will offer a health guarantee that requires a check-up by a veterinary surgeon within 48 hours of purchase.

## *Feeding*

Hamsters differ from many other rodents in having some fermentation in the stomach. This increases the breakdown of carbohydrates and proteins - but increases the requirements for minerals and vitamins. Hamsters are omnivores, they will usually eat vegetables and grains, but will also eat meat; like mice, gerbils and rats. Water drinking bottles need to be positioned low down approx. 1 - 2.5cm above floor level. Adults will drink approximately 30mls per day. Fresh water needs to be available daily. Young hamsters need to be able to reach the water drinking tube from 10 days old and will start eating dry food from 7 - 9 days of age, although they are not weaned until 20 - 25 days old. Feeding bowls can be used, but food is best scattered on the floor - this reduces stress and must be done for pregnant and nursing females. Beware of slatted feeding troughs used for long nosed rodents; flat-faced hamsters may break their teeth on the slats. Adults will eat 5 - 14g of food per day. The diet should be 16-24% protein, 60-65% carbohydrate, 5-7% fat. Diets high in polyunsaturated fats can lead to Vitamin E deficiency with muscle weakness, eye discharges, irritability and death. Many disease problems relate to poor quality nutrition, many pet shop "Hamster Mix" foods are very low in protein. The food can be supplemented with occasional treats of animal based protein, cooked meat or cheese and small pieces of fruit and vegetable. It is worth having good quality clean hay available for chewing; many hamsters will also chew on their bedding straw.

## *Handling*

Hamsters that have been regularly, gently handled from a young age rarely bite. However even those tamed hamsters can bite if wakened suddenly. Hamsters can be held in a cupped hand, or can be restrained by holding the loose skin of the neck or back. The large cheek pouches mean that lots of skin has to be collected up before there is any restraint. Hamsters can also be wrapped up in a cloth to permit handling. Beware of dropping your pet - fractures often result.

## *Housing*

Hamsters can cope with a variety of housing from glass vivaria to complex plastic modules with interconnecting tubes. Wooden cages are not advised - hamsters will soon chew an escape route. Hiding places and an area of deep bedding for nesting are desirable. Solid track plastic running wheels, plastic balls that hamsters can propel by walking within them and branches for climbing can provide environmental stimuli. The open track wire wheels are potentially dangerous and can lead to leg injuries. Sawdust or peat (or the peat substitutes) are often used as absorbent base materials for the cage floor. Suitable materials for nesting are hay, fine chopped straw, wood shavings, or shredded paper. Cotton wool or the cellulose fibre materials can lead to digestive obstructions if eaten and sometimes can become trapped around legs and act as tourniquets. Temperatures need to be kept between 19 and 23°C. If the environment falls below 5°C hamsters will often hibernate. Golden hamsters are not sociable animals and are best kept singly; this reflects the natural social organisation. Fighting will usually occur between hamsters housed together. The only exceptions are littermates (of the same sex) that have been housed together since birth. Even intended breeding pairs need to be carefully observed to prevent potentially fatal fights - the females will only tolerate males for half a day in four! The dwarf hamsters will often live as pairs, provided they have been kept that way from weaning. Trying to introduce two adult hamsters (except during oestrus) will often lead to savage

fighting. Cages should be cleaned weekly. Over vigorous cleaning of entire males' housing is not recommended. Males scent-mark their territory and will be stressed by too scrupulous hygiene.

#### *Veterinary care*

No vaccinations are required for hamsters. A veterinary check-up immediately after purchase is a sensible precaution as some problems may be identified even at this stage. Hamsters are rarely neutered. A six monthly check-up will allow the weight to be monitored and as a way of spotting problems early. If your hamster appears to be off colour, or is behaving differently, it is sensible to have a thorough veterinary examination.

Like many animals that are preyed upon, hamsters will hide symptoms of disease. If they allow themselves to appear "a little off colour" it will make them easy victims to predators. Therefore by the time that symptoms show the animals may be very sick having been getting worse over a period. Therefore if you are ever in doubt about the health of your pet don't wait.