

# Gerbils

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## Natural History

Gerbils, more specifically Mongolian gerbils (*Meriones unguiculatus*), are small rodents belonging to the family Muridae that contains most rat, mouse, and gerbil species. There are at least 87 species of gerbil, but it is the Mongolian gerbil that is most prominent in the pet trade. In the 19th and early 20th century, gerbils were almost exclusively used as laboratory animals for medical and scientific research. Following a small group of approximately 50 gerbils brought to the US in the mid 1950s, these rodents started showing up in the pet trade as well. It is thought that all pet gerbils in the US are descendents of these original animals. Gerbils are native to the semi-deserts and steppes of Mongolia, where summers tend to be very hot and winters tend to be very cold.

## Characteristics and Behavior

Gerbils are very social animals that live in family groups with a parental pair, their current litter, and a few older pups. They live in deep, intricate burrows with 10-20 separate exits. These rodents tend to be gentle and tolerant of handling. Gerbils tend to be active more in the morning and evening, as compared to the nocturnal nature of many other rodents. They are fast and curious and rarely bite, although they may be too wiggly and active for young children. Numerous color morphs have been bred including shades of brown, tan, white, cream, and black. Gerbils are considered good pets for beginners due to their moderate care requirements, social nature, and gentleness.

## Lifespan

2-4 years.

## Adult Size

45-130 grams.

## Housing

Gerbils should be housed with at least one other gerbil due to their social natures. They need a deep, well ventilated cage that allows for very deep (6-12 inches) of non-scented, undyed paper bedding such as CareFresh. Wire cages provide better ventilation but may not be practical to allow burrowing behavior. Glass aquariums with a

mesh top are excellent for providing deep bedding but care must be taken to prevent build up of ammonia. Some keepers also choose to make their own cages out of wood or even a rubbermaid bin with mesh on top. Some new cages on the market provide a two-tiered enclosure with wire on the top portion for ventilation, and a solid bottom portion for burrowing. Plastic hamster cages, particularly those shaped like animals or made entirely of tubes, are not appropriate for gerbils. The bottom of a gerbil's enclosure should be solid rather than wire. Minimum size recommendations are approximately 36 square inches per gerbil, or 20-30 gallons for a pair of gerbils in a glass aquarium. Recycled newspaper and aspen are also appropriate bedding for gerbils but cedar and pine should be avoided as these can cause respiratory irritation.

Small rodents like to build nests with paper towels, paper strips, or newspaper. Fleece may be used with caution as gerbils may eat this material. If deep bedding is not provided, a dark burrow should be provided for security and comfort. Hiding spots such as plastic huts, flower pots, small boxes, or other structures should be provided. A solid-bottom exercise wheel that allows the gerbil to fully stretch out should also be provided. Gerbils are playful and curious and will appreciate various toys and structures in their enclosure to explore.

## Feeding

Wild gerbils are omnivores that consume seeds, grasses, and insects. The staple diet for a pet gerbil should be a high quality rodent block such as Oxbow Hamster and Gerbil food. Seed mixes and mixes with dried fruits and vegetables should be avoided as these are very high in fat and lacking in essential vitamins and nutrients. Gerbils will also pick out tastier, less healthy treats and leave the healthy, balanced product behind. A balanced rodent block (pelleted diet) should make up at least 75% of your gerbil's diet. As a rule, treats should make up no more than 5% of an animal's diet. Small portions of vegetables, fruits, eggs, oats, and herbs can be provided. Small portions of pasta, meat, nuts, and occasional seeds are acceptable as treats. Portions should be no larger than the size of your pinky nail.

**Veggies:** Various types of lettuce, parsley, arugula, kale, broccoli, squash, sweet potato, peppers, cucumbers, radish, sugar snap peas, okra, mint, asparagus, basil, and zucchini.

**Fruits:** Kiwi, melon, strawberries, blueberries, grapes, pears, cherries, cranberries, apples, and bananas.

## Water

A water bottle with fresh water should always be available.

## Sexing

Males have apparent testicles and a longer anogenital distance (the distance between the genitals and the anus). Gerbils reach sexual maturity at 9-11 weeks.

## Handling

Gerbils tend to be gentle and tolerant of handling. They can move very quickly and have sharp nails, which could lead to being dropped by younger children. Although they don't usually bite, they will if they feel threatened. Frequent gentle handling is recommended to help gerbils become accustomed to being picked up. Always support the gerbil's entire body and do not hold them suspended in the air. It is best to let the gerbil choose to crawl into your hand rather than picking them up from above. Treats can be used to encourage the gerbil to accept handling. Do not pick a gerbil up by their tail as this can lead to serious injury.

## Grooming

Gerbils should not be bathed with water, as this can cause stress and dangerous temperature drops. It is recommended to provide a chinchilla dust bath once per week to allow them to bathe. A gerbil's nails can be sharp, but their small size makes them difficult to trim. Extreme care should be taken if trimming a gerbil's nails to prevent injuring their toes.

## Enrichment

The opportunity to burrow is very important for gerbil well-being, as this is a very natural behavior for them. This is why it is so important to provide deep bedding for them. Numerous commercial rodent toys, along with paper towel/toilet paper rolls, and cardboard may also be enjoyed by gerbils. It is recommended to provide an exercise wheel to encourage physical activity. Wheels should be solid and allow the gerbil to completely stretch out their back. Hamster balls and plastic tubes are not recommended, as these have poor ventilation and can cause stress and injury. A gerbil's food can also be scattered throughout their enclosure and hidden in foraging toys rather than in a bowl. Rodent chew blocks should also be provided to help wear down their incisors, which grow continuously. Edible tree branches and other natural wood is also appropriate as chewing material.

## Zoonosis

Gerbils are not considered a significant source of zoonotic disease. Very rarely, gerbils can carry a virus called lymphocytic choriomeningitis. This disease can cause mild flu-like symptoms, or no symptoms, in healthy individuals but immunocompromised people may be at risk of serious disease.

## Health

Gerbils are not long lived and unfortunately prone to a number of diseases. Epilepsy, cancer (particularly of the scent glands), and nasal dermatitis (sore nose) are all commonly reported in gerbils. Fortunately, gerbils seem to be less prone to cancer as compared to other rodents. Heart disease, respiratory disease, GI upset, and fractures are all not uncommonly reported in gerbils as well. It is also recommended to spay/neuter at least one individual in an opposite-sex pair to prevent accidental breeding. Like other rodents, gerbils can reproduce at a very young age and have many litters. Signs of illness in gerbils include loss of appetite, diarrhea, incisor overgrowth, sneezing, wheezing, skin masses, hair loss, lethargy, and a hunched posture. Yearly wellness exams with your veterinarian can help ensure your gerbil is healthy.

### Sources and Further Reading:

- <https://lafeber.com/vet/gerbil-species-and-breeds/>
- <https://lafeber.com/vet/basic-information-for-gerbils/>
- <http://www.exoticpetvet.com/gerbil-care.html>
- <https://www.vin.com/veterinarypartner/default.aspx?pid=19239&id=9699557>
- <https://www.oxbowanimalhealth.com/uploads/files/Hamster-and-Gerbil-Care-Guide.pdf>
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