

# HAMSTERS

By Catherine Love, DVM

Updated 2021

## NATURAL HISTORY

Hamsters are a group of small rodents belonging to the same family as lemmings, voles, and new world rats and mice. There are at least 19 species of hamster, which vary from the large Syrian/golden hamster (*Mesocricetus auratus*) to the tiny dwarf hamster (*Phodopus* spp.). Syrian hamsters are the most popular pet hamsters and also come in a long-haired variety commonly known as “teddy bears.” There are numerous species of dwarf hamsters that may have multiple common names. The Djungarian dwarf (*P. sungorus*) is also sometimes called the “winter white dwarf” due to the fact that they may turn white during winter. Roborowski (Robo) dwarfs (*P. roborovskii*) are the smallest species of hamster and also quite fast. The third type of dwarf hamster commonly kept is the Campbell’s dwarf (*P. campbelli*). Chinese or striped hamsters (*Cricetulus griseus*) can be distinguished from other species due to their comparatively long tail. The original pet and laboratory hamsters originated from a group of Syrian hamsters removed from wild burrows and bred in captivity.

Wild hamsters are native to numerous countries in Europe and Asia. They spend most daylight hours underground to protect themselves from predators and are considered burrowing animals. While most wild hamster species are considered “Least Concern” by the IUCN, the European hamster is critically endangered due to habitat loss, pollution, and historical trapping for fur.

## LIFESPAN

1.5-3 years

## CHARACTERISTICS & BEHAVIOR

Both Syrian and dwarf hamsters are very commonly found in pet stores. With gentle, consistent handling, hamsters can be tamed into fairly docile and easy to handle pets, but it is not uncommon for them to be bitey and skittish. It is recommended not to allow small children to handle hamsters as they may get bitten and drop the hamster, leading to injury.

Hamsters are nocturnal or crepuscular (depending on the species) and may not be active when their owners are wanting to see them. They are also proficient escape artists. Hamsters are solitary animals and should not be housed with other hamsters. Pairs or groups of hamsters can seriously injure or even kill each other, and they breed prolifically. Hamsters are fairly clean and do not shed very much, but they are often considered the most likely to bite out of all the small pocket pets and may not enjoy handling. They tend to startle easily but can be very curious and active when comfortable. One well-known hamster behavior is their ability to store a large amount of food in their cheek pouches, giving them a puffy-cheeked appearance.

## ADULT SIZE

Syrian hamsters are the largest at 80-150 grams, with dwarf hamsters 20-45 grams depending on the species. Chinese hamsters average 30-45 grams. Males tend to be larger than females.

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## HOUSING

Unfortunately, there are many small rodent cages on the market that are extremely inappropriate for hamsters. Plastic cages that are shaped like animals or made up entirely of tubes do not provide appropriate space or ventilation. Hamsters may also be able to chew through plastic. Both wire and glass enclosures can be appropriate for hamsters. At a minimum, small hamsters need at least a 30"x20"x20" enclosure, and larger hamsters will need at least 40"x20"x20". More space is always better, and enough height should be provided to allow for at least 5-10" of bedding to burrow. Paper-based bedding such as Care Fresh or toilet paper is appropriate for hamsters. Aspen can be used but avoid cedar or pine as these can cause respiratory irritation. Cages should be well ventilated, and bottoms should be solid to prevent foot injuries.

Multiple hiding and resting spots should be provided. These can be cardboard boxes, wood hides, timothy hay huts, or other commercially available structures. Ideally, at least two hiding areas should be provided as hamsters often stash their food in hide boxes. Rodent chew toys should be provided, along with an appropriately sized, non-wire exercise wheel. Hamsters often also enjoy wooden ramps and other structures to interact with. Temperatures should be maintained between 65-80F. When temperatures drop below 41F, hamsters can enter a state of torpor.

## SEXING

Male hamsters have apparent testicles and a longer anogenital distance (the distance between the genitals and the anus).

## FEEDING

Wild hamsters are omnivores that consume seeds, grasses, insects, and other plant matter. The majority of a pet hamster's diet (75%) should be a balanced, fortified pellet. Avoid seed-based diets and pellets with dried fruits or vegetables mixed in as hamsters may pick out the tastier, less healthy pieces and leave the balanced pellets behind.

Seed diets can lead to obesity and vitamin deficiency. Fresh vegetables should make up approximately 20% of a hamster's diet, and treats (fruits, nuts, seeds) should make up no more than 5%. Food can be offered free choice; Oxbow products are recommended.

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

## WATER

A water bottle with fresh water should always be available.

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## HANDLING

Hamsters can be gently scooped up and held close to your body. Since hamsters are less active during the day, gently waking them before picking them up can help prevent startled bites. Hamsters are small and can be seriously injured if dropped. Support the hamster's entire body and do not hold them suspended in the air as this is very stressful. Taking the time to offer tasty treats and letting the hamster choose to crawl into your hands will help them feel more comfortable with handling. If your hamster is very bitey, wearing gardening gloves will offer protection from their teeth.

## ENRICHMENT

Enrichment is essential to keep a hamster mentally and physically fit. Providing deep burrowing material will allow a hamster to perform natural behaviors and feel secure. Numerous commercial hamster toys, along with paper towel/toilet paper rolls, and cardboard may also be enjoyed by hamsters. It is recommended to provide an exercise wheel to encourage physical activity. Wheels should be solid and allow the hamster 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 hamster's food can also be scattered throughout their enclosure and hidden in foraging toys rather than in a bowl.

## GROOMING

Hamsters should not be bathed with water, as this can cause stress and dangerous temperature drops. They may enjoy a chinchilla dust bath to clean themselves. A hamster's nails can be sharp, but their small size makes them difficult to trim. Extreme care should be taken if trimming a hamster's nails to prevent injuring their toes.

## ZOONOSIS

Serious disease transmission to humans is uncommon, but hamsters 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

Unfortunately, hamsters are not very long lived and they are prone to a number of diseases. A diarrheal disease called "wet tail" is a common disease associated with stress. Hamsters can become dangerously dehydrated from profuse diarrhea. Hamsters may also experience impactions in their cheek pouches, cancer, and respiratory disease. A hamster's incisors grow continuously throughout their life and naturally have a yellow coloration. Misalignment of incisors may require surgical correction. Signs of a sick hamster include a wet or soiled tail, loss of appetite, hunched posture, hair loss, and difficulty breathing. Yearly wellness exams are recommended for hamsters to ensure that they are healthy.

