



Hamster

Scientific Name: Cricetinae

Written by Dr. Scott Medlin

The term “hamster” includes multiple species of rodents from the subfamily Cricetinae who possess highly variable personalities and also have a somewhat unpredictable desire for human affection amongst individuals. Hamsters have been making wonderful pets for us for almost 100 years.

There are three common species of hamster in the pet trade.

The largest is the Syrian hamster (a.k.a. Golden hamsters). Syrian hamsters are the classic hamster that has been around as a pet for as long as anyone reading this can remember.

A newer species that can now be found in pet stores these days are known as dwarf hamsters. The most common dwarf hamster species is the Campbell’s Russian dwarf hamster. This species is smaller than their Syrian cousins, and although scoring high marks for being adorable, tend towards being more independent and are not always as inherently affectionate towards humans.

The Roborovski hamster (a.k.a. Robo’s) are the newest species in the pet trade, and are also the smallest hamsters commonly found in the pet trade. This species has only been easily available since the late 1990’s. They are approximately 1/10th the size of a typical Syrian hamster.

Enclosure: There are many simple and acceptable options for housing hamsters that can be purchased at your local pet store. The simplest form of housing is the standard 20-gallon glass or plastic aquarium with a screen lid and clamps. This set-up can house a single Syrian hamster or a pair of the dwarf or Robo hamsters. Alternatively there are several designs of hamster cage that include wire tops and plastic bottoms. These will often have multiple levels. These cages have improved ventilation compared to the aquariums, but beware that hamsters are significant chewers and some have escaped from plastic cages by doing so.

Both of these styles of caging can be sufficient, but it is important to keep in mind that keeping our hamsters on a metal grate floor is a poor choice, as are metal grate “stairs” or wire “ramps” between levels. Even wheels that are designed with metal bars or grates are dangerous for the rodents. Rodents can get their legs caught in between these wires, leading to injury. Instead, solid plastic floors, solid plastic ramps, and solid plastic wheels are the preferred choice.

Substrate: Use two to three inches of bedding to allow for easy burrowing and nest building. Paper-based bedding is preferred. Paper bedding for hamsters can range from anything as simple as shredded paper to a recycled newspaper substrate (i.e. Carefresh[®] or Oxbow’s Pure Comfort[®]), or the colorful confetti paper-based bedding, all of which can commonly be found in most pet stores. While aspen is certainly a much better option than cedar or pine bedding, our experience is that it seems to be better to avoid wood shavings altogether if possible.

Hides: Some hamsters will prefer to sleep in a hide rather than digging out a nest in the bedding material. The best hides are sometimes the easiest (such as utilizing small cardboard boxes), but there



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are also small commercially produced plastic igloos and similar structures that are designed for use as rodent hides. These work well also.

Light: Hamsters are crepuscular (awake at dawn and dusk, sleeping during the night and day) and do just fine without any additional lighting. A low lit room would be best for them during the day when they are sleeping.

Heat: Hamsters do well in the same temperatures that humans prefer when indoors (65-80F). They do not tolerate excessive cold or heat well. Be careful if your hamster lives in an aquarium to not leave them outside, because the glass walls of the aquarium will act like a magnifying glass to heat up the inside of the aquarium very rapidly. This could potentially result in heat stroke. Also, care should be taken when transporting hamsters in a car to ensure that they are well air conditioned during the summer months.

Diet: Hamsters are omnivores by nature, and in the wild they will consume a wide variety of seeds, plants and insects. However, it is impossible to recreate the same balanced mixture that each of the hamster species would forage in the wild. Instead, in captivity we need to provide our rodents with a nutritionally complete, high-quality, pelleted diet. Avoid the commercially available seed mixtures. Even if there are pellets mixed into the seed mixture, your hamster may pick the delicious seeds out and ignore the rest of the healthy food in the bowl. These commercial seed mixes contain large amounts of calories from fats without having significant amounts of nutrition. Over time a seed diet will lead to more illness, less energy, and a shorter lifespan.

Pellets provide all the nutrition that your hamster will need. A couple of reputable brands include Mazuri and Oxbow ("Healthy Handfuls"). Alternatively most rodent block-based diets will be suitable as well. A pellet/block diet should be the majority of your pet's main food source.

It is okay to supplement this primary diet with fresh fruits, veggies, small amounts of whole grain pasta, and even a very small amount of seed. These foods should be offered in small amounts and only occasionally as they can be high in sugars. Avoid sticky foods that can become trapped in your hamster's cheek pouches and stay away from chocolate, onion, and citrus fruits as these can be harmful to hamsters.

Water: Most hamsters readily accept water bottles as their source of water. The water should be changed out every 1-2 days to keep it fresh and prevent bacteria build up. Also check your bottles daily to make sure that they are working properly and not blocked or leaking. Leaking can soil your hamsters bedding and lead to mold/mildew growth.