

Accommodation

Hamsters should be housed in a large glass or plastic tank with good ventilation, such as a repurposed fish aquarium with an open or mesh lid. Guinea pig cages or large plastic storage 'bin' cages are also good and cost-effective options. The bigger enclosure you can provide for your hamster the better – their cage is often their whole world, and in the wild they would run around up to several miles a night. Hamster cages found in pet shops are often too small to permanently house a hamster and should only be considered as back-up or travel enclosures.

The base of their enclosure should be filled with 6-10 inches of paper-based bedding material – hamsters are natural burrowers and feel safest and happiest when they are able to tunnel around. Bedding should be paper-based as it is absorbent and holds the shape of your hamster's burrows well. It is also dust-free – wood shavings are not recommended as the small dust particles can cause respiratory problems.

Nest boxes or hides should also be provided as retreats around their enclosure, with paper bedding or Timothy hay. Cotton wool, even if it is marketed as hamster-safe, should not be used as it can be easily impacted in cheek pouches or cause blockages in their digestive tract.

Hamsters are very active and inquisitive animals so within the cage, wheels and toys should be provided. However, be aware that some toys can be quickly destroyed, so replaceable cardboard rolls and boxes when needed to provide the best entertainment. Hamsters benefit from chewable toys, for example wooden blocks, rope balls, Timothy hay sticks/loops, and even pieces of dry whole-wheat pasta.

Wheels should also have a solid base, such as cork, because plastic or metal wheels can cause injuries if the hamster gets their paws caught in the gaps. Dwarf species should have a minimum 8-inch wheel, and Syrians a minimum 10-inch wheel – if the wheel is too small the hamster will arch it's back whilst running, which can lead to spinal problems and cause pain for your hamster.

Specific recommendations for suitable enclosures, toys, wheels and bedding materials can be found on popular hamster forums online.

Temperature – ensure that the tank is kept out of direct sunlight as these enclosures will easily overheat.

The tank should be cleaned at least once every 1-2 weeks to help prevent disease, especially the nest box as hamsters are prone to hoard food here. It is recommended to only clean out the areas soiled with urine, faeces, or old food – studies have shown that a full clean-out where all the bedding is replaced is very stressful to hamsters, as it entirely removes their scent and familiarity.

Companions

Syrian hamsters are solitary animals, and will certainly fight if kept together.

Chinese and Russian species can be more social, so it may be possible for experienced owners to keep them in pairs or single sex groups. However, they should be monitored extremely carefully for any signs of fighting – even if the hamsters have lived together for several months, they can suddenly become intolerant to each other and fights can quickly lead to life-threatening injuries. It is therefore safer to keep them housed separately, but if you do decide to keep them together, be prepared to separate them at any time and keep another ready-made enclosure at hand.

At first, hamsters can seem unsociable with their owners and may run and hide – this is normal behaviour, as they are a prey species, but with time they can learn to trust you and be easy to handle. It is recommended to leave them alone the first few days after bringing them home. If a hamster is frightened it may hiss or try to bite, this doesn't mean that they are aggressive, it is usually a last resort to tell you that they are scared. You can handle items in their enclosure such as toys or handfuls of bedding to leave your scent for them to get used to. Try not to pick them up straight away – slowly build your hamster's trust by gently offering treats for them to take out of your hand. When picking a hamster up, it is better to scoop them up from the sides rather than pick them up from above, as this can be scary for them and may be seen as predatory behaviour.

'Bathtub bonding' is a great bonding exercise – pick up your hamster using a small box, mug, or your hands, then allow them to roam over you whilst you sit in an empty

bathtub. This allows them to get used to your presence and scent whilst they are in control of the situation and able to move away from you if they choose. With time, your hamster can become a very tame and sociable companion.

What to feed

Hay, such as Timothy hay, should be provided for your hamster. Your hamster may chew the hay or use it as nesting material.

Shop-bought hamster mixes often don't contain all the nutrients a hamster needs – varied seed mixes can be bought from rodent-specific shops online. It is recommended to 'scatter feed' your hamster's seed mix around the enclosure, rather than place in a food bowl, to encourage natural foraging behaviour.

Green vegetables such as spinach, broccoli or cucumber are excellent treats.

Whilst fruits can be tasty, it is not recommended to regularly provide sugary fruits for your hamster, as they are prone to diabetes (especially dwarf species).

Water should be freely available in bowls or bottles, and should be changed daily.

Hamsters are omnivores and can be given mealworms as treats a couple of times a week.

Vaccinations

No routine vaccinations are currently recommended for hamsters.

Neutering

Male hamsters may be castrated in order to reduce fighting, or prevent reproduction.

Parasites

No routine parasite prevention is currently recommended for hamsters. However, hamsters can occasionally pick up mite infestations, so if you notice your hamster scratching a lot or losing fur, they may need to be given a parasite treatment from your vet.

Signs of ill health

As hamsters are a prey species they will hide illnesses extremely well, so the first time you see any signs you must act quickly, as they may be in the later stages of illness and no longer able to hide their symptoms.

A healthy hamster will be bright and alert with clear and open eyes, ears and nostrils. Their coat should be fluffy and smooth, and they should groom themselves often. Your hamster should also be keen to eat and drink, run around, and pass faeces regularly.

It is important to become familiar with your hamster's normal appearance, movement and behaviour, in order that signs of illness can be noticed at an early stage. It is advisable to visit a vet who routinely deals with hamsters for a general health check at the very least once a year.

You should look out for any changes in appetite or faeces passed, as well as changes in weight, behaviour, coat condition or breathing. Other signs of illness include discharges from the eyes, nose, mouth, or back end. If your hamster appears quiet or less active, not eating as much, not passing faeces as much, or if their coat becomes dull or unkempt, there may be a hidden problem and they should see a vet for a check-up.

If you have any concerns, do not hesitate to contact a hamster vet as soon as possible.