



Royal Animal Hospital – Hamster Care

Hamsters

Hamsters are peculiar little rodents with large cheek pouches and short stubby tails. The Syrian hamster's (golden hamster) wild habitat extends through the Middle East and Southeastern Europe.

Since their domestication, several color and hair coat varieties of the Syrian hamster have arisen through selective breeding. The three basic groups which now exist include the common 'golden' hamster, colored short-haired 'fancy' hamster, and long-haired 'teddy bear' hamster.

On occasion, one may encounter other species of hamsters, but these are much less common than the Syrian hamster.

Diet

As with any pet, good quality food and clean, fresh water must be provided at all times. The precise nutritional requirements of hamsters have not been fully determined. In the wild, these animals feed on plants, seeds, fruit and insects. Current recommendations for feeding in captivity are pelleted rodent ration containing 15% - 20% protein. These rations are typically processed as dry blocks or pellets designed for rodents. Seed diets are also 'formulated' and sold for hamsters, but these diets should only supplement the basic rodent pellet. Seed diets contain high levels of fat which can easily become rancid if improperly stored. In addition, when fed alone, these diets often lead to obesity and potential nutritional deficiencies, especially calcium. Other supplements to the diet may include sugarless breakfast cereals, whole wheat breads, pasta, cheese, cooked lean meats, fresh fruits and vegetables; all fed in moderation. Hamsters eat approximately 12 grams of food daily, and usually consume the majority of this at night. Hamsters are like little pack rats that often hoard their food in a corner of their cage, making it seem as though they eat a lot more than they really do.

Water is easily provided in water bottles equipped with sipper tubes. This method also helps keep the water free from contamination. Always make sure that the tubes are positioned low enough to allow the pet easy access. Juvenile hamsters need special consideration to make sure they are strong enough to use the sipper tube as well as reach it. The average hamster drinks approximately 10 ml of water per 100 grams body weight (average adult size). Although this amount is only a fraction of the total bottle volume, fresh water should be provided daily, not only when the bottle empties.

Facts

Average Life Span: 2 - 3 years

Adult Body Weight: 100 - 150 grams

Environmental Temperature Range: 65 - 80 F

Relative Humidity Range: 40 - 70 %

Age at First Breeding: male : 10-14 wks, female: 6-10 wks

Gestation Period: 15.5 - 16 days

Litter Size: 5 - 10 (average)

Weaning Age: 21 - 25 days



Handling

Hamsters handled frequently from a young age usually remain docile and seldom bite. These animals of a docile nature can be picked up gently by cupping in one or both hands and held against one's body. Beware that even docile hamsters may bite if surprised or abruptly awakened from sleep.

Other hamsters, however, may not have received a lot of attention and handling throughout their lives, and thus may be more apprehensive and aggressive. Any animal whose personality is not fully known must be approached cautiously. The use of a small towel or gloves can assist the handler in capturing and restraining such a pet. Another method of capture involves coaxing the animal into a container (such as a can or tube), which can then be removed from the cage. Once removed from the cage, biting hamsters can be restrained by grasping a large amount of skin at the scruff of the neck. As much skin as possible must be grasped using this method because their skin is very loose. If lightly scruffed, the hamster can easily turn around within its skin and bite the handler.

Housing

Several types of cages are available that are suitable for housing hamsters. Many of these units come equipped with cage 'furniture' such as exercise wheels, tunnels and nest boxes as added luxuries. Such accessories, as well as sufficient litter depth within which to burrow, are desirable for the pet's psychological well-being. Cages should be constructed with rounded corners to prevent chewing. Hamsters will readily chew through wood, light plastic and soft metal; so recommended caging materials are wire, stainless steel, durable plastic and glass. Beware that glass and plastic containers drastically reduce ventilation and can lead to problems with humidity, temperature and odor concentration. These materials make suitable cages when at least one side of the enclosure is open for

air circulation. In addition, make sure that the enclosure is escape proof, because these little rodents are known escape artists.

Hamsters do very well in solid bottom cages with deep bedding and ample nesting material. Bedding must be clean, non-toxic, absorbent, relatively dust free, and easily acquired. Shredded paper or tissue, wood shavings and processed corn cob are preferred bedding. Be sure that the wood shavings and ground corn cob are free from mold, mildew or other contamination before using. Cotton and shredded tissue paper make excellent nesting materials.

Adult hamsters require a minimum floor area of 19 square inches and a cage height of 6 inches. Female breeding hamsters require much larger areas. Optimal temperature range for hamsters is between 65o to 80oF, with babies doing best at 70o to 75oF. The relative humidity should be between 40% and 70%. Twelve hour light cycles are preferred, with hamsters being more active during the night.

Pet hamsters are generally housed singly. Mature female hamsters tend to be very aggressive towards one another and should never be housed together. Females are also larger and more aggressive than males, thus males usually need to be separated immediately after breeding. Males may also fight when housed together, but tend to be less aggressive than females.

As a rule of thumb, the cage and accessories should be cleaned thoroughly once to twice weekly. An exception to this schedule is when newborn babies are present; wait until they are at least two weeks old to disturb the cage. Other factors that may require increased frequency of cleaning are the number of hamsters in the cage, the type of bedding material provided, and the cage design and size. Cages are sanitized with hot water and nontoxic disinfectant or detergent, then thoroughly rinsed. Water bottles and food dishes should be cleaned and disinfected daily.

Reproduction

The sex of hamsters can be easily determined. Mature male hamsters possess large, prominent testicles, which often alarm owners who first notice their size and mistake them for tumors. In addition, the genitourinary to anal separation is much wider in males than females, making it possible to sex young hamsters.

Male hamsters should be first bred at 10 to 14 weeks of age. Females can be bred at the age of 6 to 10 weeks. As the female comes into 'heat' she will begin assuming a breeding stance with her back swayed and body stretched out. When petted over her back, she will remain motionless and sway her back even further. A thin mucus will be noticed coming from her vulva on the next day of the 'heat' cycle, which indicates that estrus will occur two days later. For breeding, place the female into the male's cage about one hour before dark. Closely observe the pair for mating activity or fighting. Females can be very aggressive towards males and can cause serious injuries. At the first sign of aggression by the female, remove the male; then try again the next night. Also, remove the male shortly after a successful mating has taken place.

Pregnancy is of very short duration in hamsters; lasting only 15 to 16 days. Just before delivery, the expectant mother will become restless and may discharge a small amount of blood from her vulva. Do

not handle or disturb her at this time. It is wise to clean her cage two weeks following breeding, so her cage is relatively clean when babies arrive. Litter size ranges from 5 to 10 pups; larger litters are not uncommon. The pups are born hairless with their eyes and ears closed. However, they do already have their front teeth, the incisors.

Provide ample nesting material and bedding for the new mother and young. Plenty of fresh food and water should be available before the babies are born. DO NOT disturb the mother and young for any reason during the first week or two after birth. If a mother hamster seems threatened for any reason, she typically will kill and cannibalize the young. In other instances, she may stuff the young into her cheek pouches and frantically carry them around the cage looking for a safe place to establish a nest. Occasionally, pups will suffocate as a result of this activity, especially if the disturbance is prolonged.

Young hamsters usually begin eating solid food at 7 to 10 days of age, but are not weaned until 21 to 25 days. Provide food on the cage floor for the young and mother, and also have soaked, softened pellets available for them as well. Make sure that the water bottle is low enough for the weanlings to use, and that they are strong enough to use it; or provide an alternative water source during this time.