

# HAMSTERS

by Candise du Plessis

Hamsters were first discovered in Syria, but they are native to many parts of the world. The name they go by today is derived from the German word “hamstern,” which means “hoard”—because that is exactly what they do with any extra food they might find. Although their downright cuteness makes them popular with prospective pet parents, these animals have some special requirements that must be met in order for them to be happy and healthy.



The most common hamsters are the teddy-bear hamster, which has a life-span of plus minus 2-3 years. The dwarf hamster has a life span of plus minus 1-2 years. Hamsters are not ideal for children under the age of 6 years old, as hamsters are fragile and tend to nip when frightened or mishandled, and the child might drop the hamster which can cause serious injury.

Hamsters are nocturnal by nature and tend to be most active in the evenings and early morning. Your hamster can be very entertaining to watch as they explore and venture about.

## HOUSING

It is important to provide your hamster with the right cage. If you go for a wire cage, make sure the spacing between the cage bars is narrow enough so that your hamster cannot escape. If the cage has a wire platform at the bottom that is removable, I suggest that you remove it, as the hamster's paw can become stuck and the wire bottom doesn't allow the hamster to tunnel deep enough underneath the bedding. If the cage has an upstairs with a wire balcony I suggest that you cover the floor of it with cardboard from a cereal box, so that the hamster will be unable to get its paw stuck.



An aquarium as a hamster cage is not ideal at all!! The aquarium does not allow much ventilation in, and is a breeding ground for bacteria to grow, which can cause many diseases for your hamster.

Plastic cages are the best for hamsters. They are safe and easy to clean. They have different levels for your hamster with plastic bottoms as the flooring. Some of the plastic cages already have tunnels in for your hamster, which can be extended to create a whole route for your hamster to run; they also provide good ventilation holes.

## DIET

The easiest way to make sure your pet hamster's diet provides everything he needs is to buy the best prepared hamster food you can find. Then supplement its diet with pieces of fresh fruits and veggies, throwing in an occasional mealworm or cricket. A varied diet is important to hamsters.

A mixture of pellets, grains, dried fruit and nuts make a good food for your hamster, but make sure the pellet contains mostly lucern. Avoid food that has too much sunflower seed and nuts as they are high in fat.

To add variety and added nutrition to their diet you can add fresh vegetables and fruit such as apples, bananas, carrots, celery, cucumbers, grapes, oranges etc., and the key with fresh food is to supply it in small portions since hamsters store away excess food. Rotten fruit and vegetables is not something you want in your pet's cage.

You can use the following food as treats for your hamster, as an alternative to shop



bought treats. Scrambled or hard boiled eggs, dog biscuits, sugar-free cereal, whole-wheat bread, and uncooked pasta. You can even give them mealworms and crickets, but remember only as a treat. Supplements are a good way to guarantee a well-balanced diet. Dietary supplements are available with vitamins, minerals and calcium that come in flavours your hamster will enjoy.

## HEALTH

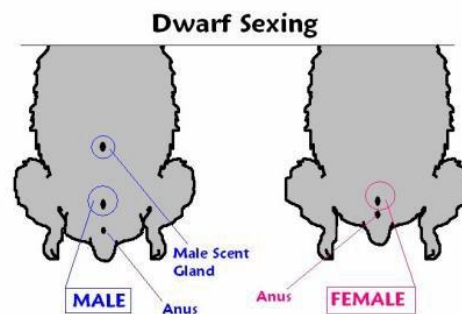
Even with good care and a proper diet, injuries and illness can occur. Signs of illness may be weight loss, loss of appetite, and behavioural changes. Below is a list of the more common issues that can affect a hamster's health:

- Broken bones
- Bites which can lead to infection if not treated.
- Cheek pouch injuries
- Abscesses
- Overgrown teeth occur when a hamster is unable to gnaw and shorten its teeth.
- Eyes, hamsters do develop eye problems, in response to eye injuries or infections, and they can develop cataracts.
- Respiratory Infections of which the symptoms are laboured breathing, discharge from the nose and eyes, weight loss and loss of appetite.
- Gastrointestinal infections symptoms of which are a strained tail, diarrhoea, lethargy, failure to eat or drink, irritability and ruffled hair.
- Fungal Infections are caused by damp, dirty housing and inadequate diets.
- Heatstroke symptoms are heavy breathing and laying on it's belly.

## SEXING HAMSTERS AND BIRTH

Female hamsters have the genital opening and the anus close together, males have the genital opening separated from the anus as shown in the diagram:

Hamster gestation varies but is usually between 18-22 days, the hamster litter size is usually in the 4-6 range, but can be as few as 3 and as many as 12 depending on the type of hamster. The pregnant female will appear fatter 2-3 weeks after mating. She may spend less time running and more time eating. Pregnant females tend to be more aggressive as their due date approaches. The female will increase in nest building activity, grooming, and digging before giving birth. She will stand erect as the babies (pups) are born, and will sever the umbilical cord on her own. The pups are born at 10-30 minute intervals and mommy will sleep or tidy the nest area between births. Mommy will then clean her pups, make sure there is enough water and food for her as she will be very hungry and thirsty after giving birth. Do not open the cage and try to touch her babies as she will see this as a threat Do not open the cage and try to touch her babies for at least 2 weeks as she will see this as a threat and might eat her young. The female hamster may show aggressiveness towards her mate, or the male may show aggressiveness towards the babies. If that is the case, it is best to then remove the male.



The babies will begin drinking water at 13-15 days of age and start eating food between 16-21 days. Make sure that the pups are able to reach the water bottle as well as their food. The pups can be successfully weaned from the mother after about 3 weeks. Hamsters reach sexual maturity between 6 and 7 weeks of age.

## References:

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