

**All Creatures Care Cottage
1912 Harbor Blvd., Costa Mesa, CA 92627
(949) 642-7151**

Client information handout

Hamster

Introduction

Hamsters are small solitary rodents that originated in the Middle East. Bred domestically since 1930, most hamsters sold as pets are the descendants of three littermates. Hamsters have an average life span of 18-24 months, with a litter size of 5-9. They have a gestation period of 15-16 days. They reach sexual maturity at approximately 10 weeks of age and earlier.

Behavior

Hamsters are well-known escape artists, and well-secured cages are a must. Hamsters are generally docile, quiet animals that are more active at night. Hamsters with docile temperaments can be picked up and held against the body. Hamsters with a history of biting should be approached cautiously. They can be picked up and restrained by grasping a large amount of skin behind the head. Be advised hamsters can literally turn all the way around in the skin and bite the handler. Hamsters sleep soundly and need to be gently wakened before attempting to pick them up or they may bite.

Housing

Hamsters can be housed in wire, stainless steel, durable plastic or glass enclosures. Wood should not be used because your new pet could gnaw its way out given time. It is also difficult to keep wood clean. Enclosures must be built so hamsters cannot escape. (Hamsters will gnaw telephone lines, electrical cords, and furniture). Cage should be at least 6 inches tall with approximately 20 square inches of floor area per animal. Solid floors with deep bedding (shredded newspaper or wood shavings) are preferred. Good ventilation is also recommended.

Hamsters enjoy crawling and running. Wheels and tubes are a great addition to a perfect enclosure. Hamsters are usually housed singly. Mature females must not be housed together or they can become aggressive to one another. Breeding females are larger than the males and are aggressive to them as well. Cages should be cleaned and disinfected (with 1 part water to 10 parts bleach; then rinsed thoroughly and dried) at least once a week. Food and water bowls should be cleaned and disinfected once daily.

Diet

Water that is changed daily must be available at all times. Hamsters are omnivores, feeding on plants, seed, fruit and bugs. Pet hamsters are fed rat or mouse diets with at least 16% crude protein. This can be supplemented with small amounts of sugar free breakfast cereal, whole wheat bread, uncooked pasta, cheese, cooked chicken, fruit and vegetables. DO NOT feed hamster diets with a lot of seed that can become rancid and promote obesity. All food should be served in heavy dishes to prevent toppling. Keeping bowls slightly elevated keeps bedding and feces out of the food and water. Sipper bottles also provide contaminate free water. Supplemental food amounts should be no more than ½ teaspoon in 24 hours. Dog biscuits help them keep their continually growing front teeth in good shape.

Common medical problems

Many common problems of hamsters can be avoided with proper feeding and husbandry. Your hamster's incisors never stop growing, so it is important to have them regularly checked to make sure they have not overgrown. Early signs of illness are frequently overlooked, and veterinary assistance should be considered if illness is suspected.

Sick hamsters become irritable and will bite. Look for signs such as not eating, diarrhea, or weight loss. Intestinal disease is the most common disease in hamsters, and if not recognized and addressed immediately with appropriate fluid therapy at the direction of a Veterinarian, death is probable. Other common problems with hamsters are wet tail, lumps, and bite wounds. With such a short life span, aging occurs quickly. Regular exams with your exotics Veterinarian will help ensure a happy life.