



info@aeacarizona.com

Address:

1911 South Lindsay Road

Mesa, AZ 85204

Phone: (480)706-8478

Fax: (480)393-3915

After Hours **Emergency Paging System**

(pages answered every night until 10 pm!)

Hamster Care

Basic Information

Hamsters are peculiar little rodents with large cheek pouches and short stubby tails. They have gained popularity as pets and research animals since the 1930's. The Syrian hamster's (golden hamster) wild habitat extends through the Middle East and Southeastern Europe. In 1930, a litter of eight baby hamsters were taken to Israel and raised as research animals. Virtually all domesticated hamsters sold in the pet trade are research descendants of the three of the survivors of this litter. Hamsters were first introduced to the United States in 1938.

Since their domestication, several color and hair coat varieties of the Syrian hamster have arisen through selective breeding. The three basic groups that now exist include the common "golden" hamster, colored shorthaired "fancy" hamster, and longhaired "teddy bear" hamster. All three varieties are popular as pets, while the research community generally employs the basic hamster.

Occasionally, one may encounter other species of hamsters, but these are much less common than the Syrian hamster. The smaller, dark brown Chinese hamster (dwarf hamster) is often used in biomedical research, and they are sometimes acquired as pets. These hamsters are recognized for their small size, dark brown color, and black stripes over their backs. The Armenian (grey) hamster and European hamster are the two other species occasionally used in research, but seldom kept as pets. The following information pertains particularly to the Syrian or golden hamster since they are by far the most popular.

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.

Other supplements to the diet may include sugarless breakfast cereals, whole wheat bread, 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 pack rats that often hoard their food into 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 easy access to the pet. Juvenile hamsters need special consideration in whether they are strong enough to use the sipper tube, as well as are able to 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.

Handling

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

On the other hand, other hamsters 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, biting hamsters can be restrained by grasping a large amount of skin at the scruff of the neck. Using this method, as much skin as possible must be grasped 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 depth within which to burrow, are desirable for the pet's psychological wellbeing. Cages should be constructed with rounded corners to detour chewing. Hamsters will readily chew through wood, light plastic, and soft metal. Therefore, 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 escape proof, since 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 corncob are preferred beddings. Be sure that the wood shavings and ground corncob 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 65 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit, with babies doing best at 70 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit. 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 alone. 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 thoroughly cleaned once to twice a week. An exception to this schedule is when newborn babies are present. In this case, wait until they are at least two week old. Other factors that may require increased frequency of cleaning are the number of hamster 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, and then thoroughly rinsed. Water bottles and food dishes should be cleaned and disinfected daily.

Breeding Considerations

The sex of the hamsters can easily be determined. Mature male hamsters possess large, prominent testicles, which often alarm owners who first notice them and mistake them for tumors. In addition, the genitourinary to anal separation is much wider in males than females, making it possible to differentiate genders of 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 swaying and body stretched out. When petted over her back, she will remain motionless and sway her back even further. Thin mucus will be noticed coming from her vulva. For breeding, place the females 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, and then try again the next night. Also, remove the male shortly after a successful mating has taken place.

Hamsters have very short duration of pregnancy, 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 that her cage is relatively clean when babies arrive. Litter size ranges from 5 to 10 pups, but 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 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 also have soaked, softened pellets available for them. Make sure that the water bottle is low enough for the weanlings to use, and that they are strong enough to use it. You can also provide an alternative water source during this time for the pups.

Diseases

Proliferative Heitis (Wet Tail)

The most commonly encountered bacterial infection recognized in hamsters is the “wet tail” disease. The precise cause of the disease is not fully understood, but underlying infections with the bacteria *Campylobacter fetus* subspecies *jejuni* have been reported. Similar *Campylobacter* sp. are responsible for serious intestinal diseases in other animal species, such as swine, dogs, ferrets, primates, and even humans. Although this agent is suspected to be an underlying cause of this syndrome, pure cultures of the bacteria cannot reproduce the disease, suggesting other predisposing factors or agents. Such contributory factors include improper diet, sudden dietary changes, overcrowding, and other stressors.

This disease most often affects weanling hamsters between the ages of 3 to 6 weeks, but hamsters of all ages are susceptible. Since this is the age at which most hamsters are sold, this is a common disease encountered in recently acquired pets. The longhaired “teddy bear” hamster seems to be more vulnerable than the other varieties.

Death may result within 1 to 7 days after the onset of watery diarrhea. Other signs include matting of the fur around the tail, unkempt hair coat, hunched stance, loss of appetite, dehydration, emaciation, and irritability. Blood from the rectum and rectal prolapse may be noted in some serious cases. This is a very serious disease, with death being the most likely outcome.

Due to the severity of the disease, any hamster exhibiting these signs must be examined by a veterinarian as soon as possible. Antibiotics, fluid therapy, and anti-diarrhea medications will be administered to the patient. Supportive care will also be instituted. Despite all the best efforts, treatment is often unrewarding with death occurring within a couple days in many cases.

Hair Loss (Alopecia)

Hair loss can occur for a number of reasons in hamsters. The loss of hair can be due to both disease and non-disease conditions. Continual rubbing on feeders or sides of the cage as well as barbering, hair chewing by cage mates, are examples of non-disease related causes of alopecia. Infestation with demodectic mites is one of the most common infectious causes of patchy alopecia and scaling in hamsters. Other conditions that lead to hair loss include adrenal tumors, thyroid deficiency, and chronic renal disease. Some of these conditions may be correctable, while others are not.

Demodex mites are the most common external parasite causing problems in hamsters. The mites live within the hair follicles and certain skin glands of their host. The presence of these mites result in dry, scaly skin and subsequent hair loss, especially over the back and rump. This disease is rarely a problem by itself. Demodectic mange in hamsters is often associated with chronic, debilitating diseases or other underlying problems. For this reason, a thorough examination must be performed on any hamster presented with mites. To confirm the presence of mites, the veterinarian may perform a skin scrapping for microscopic observation. Treatment for the mites is often possible, but remember that there may be another problem, often more severe, underlying this one which must also be addressed.

Old Age Disease (Geriatric Conditions)

Hamsters tend to have relatively short life spans when compared with other species. The average life expectancy of a hamster is between two and three years of age. For this reason, spontaneous aging diseases are not uncommon in these animals, typically after age of one. Two of the most common geriatric diseases of hamsters are amyloidosis (protein deposition in various organs) and cardiac thrombosis (blood clots in the heart). Treatment of these conditions involves managing clinical signs since cures are not possible. Unfortunately, diagnosis of virtually any geriatric carries with it a poor prognosis.

Amyloidosis is a condition where proteins produced by the body are deposited in various organs, primarily in the liver and kidneys. Kidney and liver failure often occurs as a result of this protein deposit. Many other organs are also affected, and the changes are irreversible. Signs of this condition include swollen abdomen, urinary problems, dehydration, poor appetite, and rough hair coat. Supportive care is the only treatment since this condition is eventually terminal.

Blood clots within the heart occur at a relatively high frequency in older hamsters. This condition is known as cardiac thrombosis, and typically occurs in the left side of the heart. Many factors are involved in the formation of these clots including clotting disorders, heart failure, circulation bacterial infection, and amyloidosis.

Many other old age diseases occur in hamsters over the age of one year. Liver and kidney diseases are not uncommon in middle age to old hamsters. Other conditions commonly encountered are gastric ulcers, tumors, and dental diseases.

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Hamster Facts

- Average Life Span: 2 – 3 Years
- Adult Body Weight: 100 – 150 grams
- Environmental Temperature Range: 65 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit
- Relative Humidity Range: 40 – 70 %
- Age at First Breeding: Male: 10-14 weeks
- Female: 6-10 weeks
- Gestation Period: 15 ½ – 16 days
- Litter Size: 5 – 10 (average)
- Weaning Age: 21 – 25 days