

GUIDE TO CARING FOR DWARF HAMSTERS

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Hamsters are considered good family pets. They are nocturnal, meaning they are more active in the evening and night-time. This allows a busy family opportunity to enjoy them. They are small mammals which makes them ideal if space is limited.

HANDLING

It is important that you handle your hamster regularly to help you build up a relationship with him.

When you first get your hamster home, leave him to settle in for 24 hours to allow him time to get used to his new surroundings.

Slowly place your hand in the cage so that he gets used to your smell. When he seems happy, gently cup one hand under him and one hand over him, and pick him up. Always concentrate on holding your Dwarf Hamster as they can be very quick and may slip out of your hands. Never scruff your hamster as this can cause the eyes to prolapse. Roborovski Hamsters, in particular, are very small, so great care should be taken when handling them.

Do not try to handle your hamster if he has just woken up as they feel vulnerable at this time and may bite.

PET CODE OF PRACTICE

Never release a pet (companion animal) into the wild. It is illegal and for most species this will lead to an untimely and possibly lingering death, as they are not native to this country. Any animals or plants that do survive might be harmful to the environment. This includes the need to properly dispose of soiled substrate, so that eggs and live food can't escape into the wild.

SHOPPING LIST

- book on hamster care
- cage/housing unit
- litter and bedding material
- food and food dish
- exercise wheel
- water bottle and bottle brush
- gnaw block
- treats
- toys



THE FIVE ANIMAL WELFARE NEEDS

The Animal Welfare Act 2006 means all pet owners have a legal duty of care to their pets. Anyone who is cruel to an animal or is found not to be providing the five animal welfare needs, as listed below, can be fined and sent to prison.

- 1 Environment:** pets should be given the correct housing according to its size, this includes shelter, space to exercise and a secure, comfortable place to rest.
- 2 Diet:** pets should be offered the correct type and volume of food to cover all their nutritional needs alongside access to clean, fresh water.
- 3 Behaviour:** all pets should be allowed to exhibit normal behaviour patterns and should be provided with the facilities to do so.
- 4 Company:** some animals require the company of their own kind, whilst others should be kept on their own.
- 5 Health:** all animals should be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease, and given veterinary treatment if they become sick or injured.

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This leaflet is produced by The Pet Charity, a national charity which promotes the joy and benefits of pet ownership.

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REPTA
Reptile and Exotic Pet Trade Association



These organisations support the aims of The Pet Charity to promote the welfare and responsible keeping of pet animals

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Hamsters make suitable pets for older children, providing they are taught the responsibilities of their pet's routine for cleaning, feeding and care. Dwarf Hamsters can live for up to three years, but the average lifespan is approximately 18 months to two years.

There are four species of Dwarf Hamster commonly kept as pets, these originate from Russia, Siberia and China. In the wild they live in burrows during the day, avoiding the harshest weather and predators. They travel great distances at night to forage for food.

Dwarf Hamsters are social animals and can be kept in small, single-sex groups or pairs. Be aware that keeping them in male/female pairs will result in many babies. Animals you intend to keep together should be bought at the same time, as new individuals are rarely accepted at a later date. However, squabbles in groups are common so look out for fighting and separate them to their own cage. It is sometimes recommended to keep a singular hamster to avoid any fighting.

GENERAL CARE

Hamsters are generally hardy animals and normally stay healthy throughout their lives. They can, however, suffer from coughs and sneezes and their nose and eyes may run, so keep them warm and away from any draughts if these occur. Some Dwarf Hamsters develop diabetes, which shortens their lifespan.

There is usually no problem with hamsters' teeth; however, if they do not meet properly they will grow too long, making eating difficult. If this occurs the teeth must be trimmed regularly, which must be done by your vet.

Dwarf Hamsters do not need to hibernate, but will go into a state of very deep sleep, similar to hibernation, if there is a sudden drop in temperature below 5°C

If your hamster escapes from its cage, try putting a box in the corner of the room, containing some of its favourite food – you might find him in it the next morning.

If you are concerned about your hamster's health speak to your pet shop or vet.

CHOOSING YOUR HAMSTER

A healthy hamster:

- should be bright and alert
- should have no signs of discharge from eye, ears, mouth or nose
- should have a clean anal area
- should have a glossy coat with no bald patches or sores on the skin
- should have no sign of breathing problems
- should move around the cage easily without stiffness or staggering
- should not feel too skinny or bony

HOUSING

Cages with plastic bases and a wire top are ideal as they are easy to clean and should be escape-proof. The cage should be big enough to provide adequate space to divide their accommodation into an eating, sleeping and toilet area. More space or two adjoining rooms or storeys will add to their environmental enrichment. Some cages have extra rooms and tubes available, which provide good stimulation for your pet. It is recommended to choose a cage that is specifically designed for Dwarf Hamsters, as bars on Syrian Hamster cages can sometimes be wide enough for a Dwarf Hamster to squeeze through.

Hamsters are indoor pets and should be kept in a stable temperature, ideally between 17 – 23°C, and avoid sudden changes in temperature. The cage should not be placed in draughts, direct sunlight, next to a radiator or in damp or humid conditions.

Hamsters require lots of exercise and their cage should include a suitably sized jumbo exercise wheel. A Dwarf Hamster ball is also a great way for your pet to roam around a safe area of your home.

Soft, dust-free woodchips make a good floor covering for your hamster's cage. Soft, shredded paper can be used as bedding and nesting material – it is recommended not to use fluffy bedding.

Hamsters can be stressed when their bedding is completely changed as it no longer has their scent. It is advisable to spot-clean every few days, removing and replacing soiled areas. Partial changes of bedding can then be carried out as needed, providing new bedding but mixing in a little of the old so the hamster recognises its own scent. Dwarf Hamsters can also be litter trained to reduce the need for total clean-outs. Cages should be washed and disinfected regularly with a pet-safe disinfectant.

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FOOD AND WATER

Hamsters are omnivores so they will enjoy a varied diet. A good, commercial Dwarf Hamster mix or pellet will provide the nutrition they require. This can be supplemented 2 – 3 times a week by small amounts of fresh fruit (not citrus) or vegetables (not onion). Hamsters have pouches in their cheeks, which they use to carry and hoard food, check for any uneaten fresh food and remove daily. Extra protein in the form of cooked chicken, boiled egg or mealworms can be given a couple of times a week.

Additional vitamin supplements or a mineral block can be added to your hamster's diet. Feeding bowls should be gnaw-proof, easy to clean and hard to knock over.

Fresh clean drinking water must always be available. It can be provided by a gravity-fed water bottle designed to suit your hamster's cage.

Sticks and small branches from fruit trees can be provided for the hamster to chew on.

