



# Handle with care

## Hamsters

Species: Golden or Syrian hamster, Russian hamster, Chinese hamster  
Scientific names: *Mesocricetus auratus*; *Phodopus sungoris*, *Phodopus sungoris campbelli*, *Phodopus roborovskii*; *Cricetulus griseus*

### Description

There are three main types of hamsters that are kept as pets – the Syrian or golden, the Russian and the Chinese. They come in a large array of different colours and different lengths of coat. They have large cheek pouches which they stuff with food to store. Hamsters generally weigh between 28 and 184 g and live for about three years.

### Life in the wild

Wild hamsters are generally quite solitary creatures which live in arid parts of the world. They live underground for most of the day and then come out at night to hunt for food. During this active time they regularly travel between 11 and 21 kilometres. When two or more hamsters meet they usually fight as they are very territorial, although some dwarf species are more sociable.

### Source of animals

RSPCA animal centres, reputable breeders and rescue centres are reliable sources for hamsters – your local veterinary surgeon may also be able to advise on the best place to find hamsters in your area. It is important, wherever possible, to always see baby hamsters with their mothers as this gives owners a good picture of how well they have been cared for, their eventual size and sociability.

### Prior knowledge and preparation

Before keeping a hamster it is crucial that any potential owner finds as much out about them as they can. Only then can they decide if hamsters are the right pets for them and if they can provide the specialist care, time, financial means and long-term commitment to look after them properly. Before bringing a hamster home, owners should also make sure they have the right accommodation, food and the necessary accessories in place. They should also take the time to speak with other experienced hamster keepers and a vet for advice before making a final decision about hamster ownership.

### Vet care/costs/holiday cover

Hamsters need regular veterinary care to check their general health and problems like overgrown teeth and claws. The veterinary surgeon can advise on costs of consultations and provide information regarding hamster care and treatment.

There are various boarding facilities which look after hamsters, but you may have a reliable friend or neighbour who understands their needs and is prepared to come and look after them, or who will care for your pets in their own home.

### Unhealthy/healthy animal signs

Healthy hamsters are alert and bright eyed, with no signs of discharge around their eyes, ears, mouths and tails. Their breathing should be quiet and regular and they should have clean, glossy coats with no bald patches, sores or lumps on their skin. Their teeth and claws should be of a normal length and not look overgrown. Healthy hamsters also move around easily.

#### Health issues to find out about:

- *Wet tail*
- *Tyzzer's disease*
- *Salmonellosis*
- *Constipation*
- *Impacted cheek pouches*
- *Ringworm*
- *Mites*
- *Respiratory infections*
- *Overgrown teeth and claws*
- *Hibernation*
- *Sore eyes*

## Why are hamsters vulnerable in captivity?

Hamsters are completely dependent on their owners to provide the correct accommodation, food and veterinary care. They are nocturnal creatures and must be allowed to sleep during the day otherwise they will become stressed and ill. Hamsters are also often victims of incorrect handling and fall from their owner's hands or from an insecure surface.

If their home is kept in too cold an area they may hibernate and need to be gently warmed up in cupped hands by their owners. They are also nocturnal creatures and need to be kept quiet in the day. Hamsters are susceptible to respiratory infections and can rarely catch them from humans. People with coughs and colds should not handle hamsters as they might transmit bacterial infections such as Bordetella.

## Handling/transporting the animal home

Hamsters should be picked up very gently using both hands as a scoop and close to a flat surface. They move very quickly and are likely to jump if they are frightened. If a hamster falls more than 20 cm it could be seriously injured. They can be transported in a special carrying case, but in an emergency a small, well-ventilated and secure cardboard box can be used.

Hamsters should never be left in parked cars on warm days – even with the windows open – as they could literally roast to death. Once your hamster is home put it in its cage with its food and water and leave it alone for 24 hours.

## Needs: grouping, diet, accommodation and environment

Most hamsters, with the exception of some dwarf species, like to live alone. They will need a cage as large and interesting as possible. The minimum size for a cage should be 75 x 40 x 40 cm – but the larger the better. It should be kept in a warm place indoors, but out of direct sunlight.

The cage should have a nest box where the hamster can burrow out of sight to sleep and hoard food. There should also be a clean layer of sawdust on the floor of the home with soft hay and clean white kitchen paper for bedding. Cotton wool and newspapers are not suitable bedding material for hamsters. Cotton wool should not be used because if eaten it can lead to blockages in the gut.

A solid exercise wheel (no open rungs) fixed to the side of the cage will help hamsters get their exercise and toys like cardboard tubes and cotton reels provide entertainment. Their home should be tidied every day and thoroughly cleaned every week.

A mixed diet of seeds, grains, nuts and washed fruit and vegetables should be fed to hamsters every day and there should be a constant supply of water in a metal spouted drinking bottle and a hardwood gnawing block to wear down long teeth.

Hamsters, particularly those with long hair, should be groomed every day.

**THIS IS BASIC INFORMATION ONLY.**

If you still believe that you could care for this animal then you must obtain further specialist information prior to taking on the responsibility.