

Small rodents as pets

(for guinea pigs and rabbits see separate information sheet)

Life expectancy: Hamsters can live for 3 years, gerbils for up to 5 years. Rats are very susceptible to cancer and therefore have a much shorter life span of 1-2 years.

Costs

Animal	30-120 CHF	Depends on provenience and of whether the animals are castrated
Initial costs	600-1500 CHF	Species-adequate enclosure (Terrarium, large cage or enclosure), equipment (shelters, tubes, branches, food dishes, drinking bottles, sand bath)
Yearly costs	ca. 300 CHF	Food, veterinary costs, sojourns in animals pensions / pet-sitter at home during the holidays
Varia	Unforeseen veterinary costs can greatly exceed the price of purchase of the animals. A tumour operation may cost up to 300 CHF.	

Small rodents need space

Even before deciding for small rodents as pets, future rodent owners need to inform themselves thoroughly by asking experienced rodent owners or rodent specialists as well as by reading the relevant technical literature. Conventional cages are much too small for species-specific housing. Hamsters and gerbils must be kept in glass tanks of at least half a square meter. Rats should be accommodated with at least one square meter of usable space. Climbing species such as rats and hamsters should be given climbing structures, burrowing species such as hamsters or gerbils should be provided with digging opportunities in very deep substrate (at least 30 cm). Only thus are they able to construct their own burrows. Legal minimum for rats: ½ m² floor space, 57 cm height. For gerbils: ½ m² floor space, 25 cm deep digging substrate. For hamsters: 3800 cm² floor space, 15 cm digging substrate.

Activity

Hamsters, mice and rats are nocturnal, gerbils diurnal.

Rats and gerbils are social species

Most small rodent species kept as pets are social animals, also dwarf hamsters, with the exception of the solitary golden hamster. A person cannot replace a conspecific i.e. social partner, therefore these rodents must be housed in groups with conspecifics all the time.

Where to buy? What to pay attention to?

Small rodents can either be bought at animal shelters operated by animal protection organisations, at the rat rescue shelter by Club der Rattenfreunde (Swiss Rat Friends), or at good pet shops



branded with the quality label VZFS Codex, where customers are given expert advice. Chose animals with sleek, shiny fur, clean nose and bright eyes.

Refrain from buying animals via the internet! You either support animal mass production under unspeakable conditions, or you might even be cheated.

What are the behavioural needs of rats?

Rats can be housed either in a big cage, a converted bird aviary, an adapted cupboard or in special rat enclosures (for example the SAP-recommended “Small Animal Villa” or the “Unidom” recommended by Swiss Rat Friends). All of these need to offer at least one square meter of available floor space, more than the legal minimum. The installations should allow for space use in all three dimensions. Useful enrichment features are: fixed boards as extra levels, nest boxes, sleeping boxes and other shelters, branches for climbing and gnawing, tubes, hammocks, tunnels, ropes, ladders, catwalks... The floor area should be covered with a deep layer of dust-free bedding, since rats love to dig. However, rats can become allergic to certain types of bedding. In this case better use washable, soft towels. Rats need a regular supply of fresh branches for gnawing: Fir, spruce, hazel, willow, beech, birch, linden/lime, unsprayed fruit trees. Rats eat fresh produce (fruit and vegetables), the occasional nut, corn and grain mixtures. Do not feed cat food or meat! Rats should be able to enjoy running free in the flat, best daily at the same time in the evening (Beware cables and wire!)

What are the behavioural needs of hamsters?

Golden hamsters are proficient climbers as well as diggers. Terrariums or glass tanks (100 to 150 cm in length, at least 50 cm deep and high should allow for at least 30cm of digging substrate (wood-shavings, hay and straw), more than the legal minimum. Many natural branches allow for gnawing and climbing. Multiple-storey enclosures such as the SAP-recommended “Small Animal Villa” are an alternative, but the lowest storey has to be equipped as a digging tank with deep substrate. Drinking bottles need to be fixed on the cage top or walls and be always accessible, otherwise the animals will bury them or are unable to reach them. Even though semi-desert species, hamsters need water all the time. The commercially available hamster food mixture can be scattered on the bedding. It should not contain too many sunflower and pumpkin seeds, otherwise the animals get too obese. Hamsters like yoghurt, fresh fruit, salad, vegetables, and occasionally a little chopped lean meat. Since hamsters hoard food, fresh produce has to be removed after a day and the hamster's food store must be checked regularly for rotten food. Straw, fresh branches, cardboard tubes and dried wholemeal bread as gnawing material help wearing down their incisors. If offered a running wheel, it should be safe, i.e. no struts, solid running surface, and have a diameter at least double the animal's length (>20 cm for dwarf hamsters, >30 cm for golden hamsters).

What are the behavioural needs of gerbils?

Gerbils are bad climbers, but well-equipped diggers. Gerbil glass tanks (100 to 150cm long, at least 50cm height and breadth) should offer an at least 30cm deep layer of substrate consisting of hay, straw, wood-shavings and branches. Drinking bottles need to be accessible and to be fixed on the cage top or tank walls, otherwise the animals will bury them or cannot reach them. Even though a semi-desert species, gerbils need water all the time. The commercially available gerbil food mixture can be sprinkled on the bedding. It should not contain too many sunflower and pumpkin seeds, otherwise the animals get obese. Gerbils like yoghurt, fresh fruit, salad, and vegetables. Straw, fresh branches, cardboard tubes and dried wholemeal bread as gnawing material help wearing down their incisors. Gerbils do not like to be carried around and stroked. They are susceptible to epileptic seizures in stressful situations.

Castration / same-sexed groups

Breeding should be prevented, since finding good places for the offspring is very difficult or even impossible, and there are many animals already waiting for new owners at regional shelters. Housing same-sexed groups is a preferable option in gerbils for both sexes, in rats for females. Rat males should be castrated, then they can live peacefully in groups with conspecifics of either sex. Golden hamsters are solitary animals, but some dwarf hamsters such as the Sungarian or Campbell hamster are more social and can be housed in pairs with a castrated male.

Pets and Holidays

The stress-susceptible small rodents are preferably left at home in their own enclosure under close supervision and care of a dependable person. As an alternative, the rodents can also be brought to an animal pension or local shelter, within their own enclosure, a holiday solution which costs 10-20 CHF per day. Abandon of animals is forbidden in Switzerland and can be fined with up to 20'000 CHF.

Rats, Gerbils, Hamsters and Kids

Small rodents that are kept according to their species-typical needs offer attractive opportunities to observe animal behaviour. All on their own, children cannot take care for the rodents. An adult needs to guide and supervise them. These rodent species should not be carried around and stroked. It was scientifically shown that, when handled, small rodents immensely suffer from stress reactions, such as an increased heart rate for up to 2 hours and an impairment of their immune system. They enjoy their regular free run in the flat, if they can choose when to venture out from their enclosure and when to return. Nocturnal rats and hamsters are less suitable for children than diurnal gerbils.

Information and contacts

- „Rats“, „Gerbils“, „Hamsters“, „Mice“, „Degus“, „Chinchillas“, „Species-adequate enclosures“ (german, french, italian), Information sheets edited by Swiss Animal Protection SAP / Schweizer Tierschutz STS, Dornacherstrasse 101, 4008 Basel, 061 365 99 99, Fax 061 365 99 90, www.tierschutz.com, sts@tierschutz.com, also helpdesk, free professional advice on small rodent handling, housing and husbandry (German, French, English), free brochures, addresses of shelters, children's club www.krax.ch
- Highly recommendable: “Leitfaden zur optimalen Rattenhaltung” / “Guide to optimal rat housing” (German only), guidebook issued by Swiss Rat Friends, CHF 20, order at www.rattenclub.ch, Swiss Rat Friends (Club der Rattenfreunde), member society of Swiss Animal Protection SAP, PO Box 314, 4418 Reigoldswil, www.rattenclub.ch, info@rattenclub.ch, helpdesk & advice: 078 670 33 31, rehoming of abandoned rats: 079 624 23 20.
- Information brochures “Hamsters – species-adequate pet keeping” and “Rats – species-adequate pet keeping” (German, French, Italian), issued by the Swiss Federal Veterinary Office. Can be ordered for free from the Swiss Federal Veterinary Office (PDF or booklet), www.bvet.admin.ch and www.tiererichtighalten.ch

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