

HAMSTER/MICE/GERBIL CARE



What's the Difference and Which Do I Want?

Gerbils and mice are, generally, more friendly than hamsters. That said, many hamsters are just as friendly. That's what's great about a rescue--we can tell you which hamsters are friendly and which need more training.

Gerbils and mice are much faster than hamsters. Their reaction to fear is to run, so they are capable of running pretty quickly. Hamsters react to fear by biting unless they are taught otherwise. Many of our hamsters are already taught otherwise. But because their defense is biting, they are not quick runners. This means they are easier to hold and control. In a later section, we will discuss how to teach a hamster not to bite. We call it "taming," and it can be a great bonding experience. We generally recommend taming a hamster to experienced hamster owners or people looking for a challenge.

So long story short, gerbils and mice are fast, but rarely bite. Hamsters are much slower and some are prone to biting. In addition, gerbils are day time creatures while hamsters and mice are night time creatures.

Gerbils can sometimes be the right choice for kids. However, tame hamsters are sometimes better, as they are easier to handle. Gerbils can also sometimes be hard to cage (see next section).

Ask us about which pocket pet is right for you--we can tell you what we have in the rescue and help you pick the pet that's going to best meet your lifestyle and desires in terms of personality and temperament.

**Note: Want to learn how NOT to get bit by a pocket pet? See our section on handling below to increase your chances of staying bite-free ten fold!*

Types of Hamsters

Dwarf or full size hamster?

Full size hamsters tend to be better with people and bite less. However, this is a generalization. We regularly encounter dwarf hamsters who are very good with people and full size hamsters that bite. Dwarf hamsters live 1-2 years while full size hamsters live 2-3 years.



Syrian or Golden?

There is no significant difference between these two types that means much when adopting. Golden hamsters are golden in color and have a different face shape than syrian hamsters. It really doesn't matter which one you choose, and we often don't know which breed a hamster is anyway.

Teddy Bear Hamsters

This means that the hamster has long hair, whether it's golden or syrian. Teddy bears are always full size hamsters. Their personalities vary like any other animal's and there's nothing specific about having long hair that makes a better or worse pet.

What about the other types of hamsters in the store?

There are different types of hamsters, but they're difficult to identify. They're often interbred, and while we are experts at caring for hamsters, we aren't experts at identifying breeds. We've also found in our research that there is no general agreement on the subject. Pet stores certainly can't figure it out, and websites are no more conclusive. However, there is a great deal of information on the web. Google is a good place to start if you want to research breeds.

Cage Types

You have more or less three options in terms of cages. We'll go over the pros and cons of each.

Cages with Tubes

These are usually CritterTrail or Sam cages. They look cool and fun, but really they have more downsides. For one thing, many of those pieces are detachable, and you're not the only one who knows how to detach them--your critter does too. In addition, the nest boxes on top can be dangerous. Some hamsters stuff the tube leading to the box and suffocate or die of dehydration when they can't reach their bottles. You should also be careful of the size of your hamster in these cages. While dwarves fit well into these cages, full-size hamsters are too large for the small ones--there's just not enough space. They're too large for the tubes on all of the cages too.

Aquariums

Aquariums definitely have their upsides. For one thing, they are the most escape-proof, provided you put a couple of books on top of the cage. They last a long time too. On the down side, they are on the expensive side and heavy, which makes cleaning difficult. If you've got the money and don't mind cleaning them, though, we definitely recommend aquariums. Gerbils do especially well in aquariums as some, even many, gerbils will eat through plastic.

Plastic Pan Bottoms and Wire Tops

See the picture at the right for an example of this type of cage. They come in many varieties but look basically like that picture. These are our favorite cages. They are easy to wash and are much cheaper than aquariums. When you go to the store, you want to make sure you get one that's large enough for your animal to run around. But be careful too--if you get one with bars too far apart, small mice may be able to fit through. However, most cages have standard widths between bars and will work fine. The ones at the store come in different varieties and are sold at different prices. The cheaper ones are just as good as the expensive ones. It's about size and design. If it has a wire grid on the bottom, be sure to remove it. Your pocket pet needs to be able to burrow in its bedding, and you're going to have to clean the cage anyway. So the wire grid on the bottom will do nothing except make your pet uncomfortable.

The only down side to this type of cage is that some gerbils will eat through it. If they do, keep in mind that it will also eat through a CritterTrail cage. So an aquarium will be your only choice. You can either buy an aquarium for your gerbil right off the bat or you can try one of these cages first and buy an aquarium if you have to.

Cage Accessories

Your pet's cage will need the following items:

- Water bottle and holder
- Food bowl
- House in which to hide and nest
- Wheel



An important note about your pet's wheel: do NOT buy a wheel with parallel bars. The wheel should either have a grid with bars going in both directions or a solid surface. Parallel bars result in missed steps and broken legs. The two pictures at the right are of appropriate wheels.

Food

In terms of nutritional needs, lab blocks are the best option for all three types of animals. They look like rectangular brown blocks and are very healthy. However, here at the rescue, we also provide a small amount of seed-based food. Hamsters, gerbils, and mice like to stuff their cheeks with their food and carry it around, burying it and protecting it. The seed-based food is better suited to this habit, and since that's a large part of their life, we like to provide them with the means.

Hamsters, gerbils, and mice should always have at least a small stash of food in their cage. You might have to check their nest to make sure they have some available. Because they store their food, it is not necessary to feed them every day. Every three or four days--provided you give them enough food--is sufficient.

Water

Fresh water should be provided every couple of days. You should check your pet's water bottle every day. Pocket pets sometimes get a piece of bedding stuck in the bottle, which allows all of the water to spill out of it. If you don't check daily, your pet could die of dehydration or get sick from sitting in wet bedding. If your pet spills its bottle, immediately empty the cage, clean it, and give your pet dry bedding and fresh water.

Bedding

You have many options for bedding:

- CareFresh (you must freeze this before using it as it sometimes contains mites)
- Aspen (fairly cheap, especially from tractor supply stores)
- Shredded Newspaper (great option if you've got a shredder, but you should put some aspen or Care Fresh in with it, as newspaper does not absorb odor)
- EcoFresh (top of the line, but very expensive)
- Yesterday's News (somewhat expensive but great stuff)
- SoftSorbent (also top of the line, but also expensive)

What you want to remember is that pine and cedar are NEVER an option. These are very bad for your pet.

Bedding should be changed and the cage cleaned once a week. If your pet is female and not smelly, you may be able to go every other week. It depends on what type of bedding you use too. Basically, if the cage smells, clean it! Your pet doesn't want to sit in filth any more than you do!

Handling

Many pocket pets are surrendered to us because their owners say they bite. This is true, but only if you don't handle them correctly. There are two important things to remember in order to prevent biting with pocket pets.

1. Hamsters, and some gerbils and mice, are territorial. This is not bad. It just is. Their cage is small and it is the only territory in the world that they have. So the key here is to not invade it. At least, not with your hands. Use their food bowl or their house to scoop them out of their cages. Once they are out of their cage, they most likely won't bite you. Dump them into your hands or lap and you can play together all you want. Just leave them there little space.

2. If you bring your hand down on top of a pocket pet--particularly a hamster, it will react as if you are a predator. Why? Because that is the angle at which a predator's mouth comes at them. The solution? Don't bring your hand down on top of them! Scoop them up with both hands from underneath!

If you and your kids adhere to these two rules, you just improved your chances of not getting bit ten fold!

Socializing and Play Time

If you want your pet to maintain its social skills, it should be handled for at least five minutes every day. However, the good thing about pocket pets is that if you miss a day, they won't mind.

What do you do during play time? Let them run around on your lap and in your hands. Small animal play pens work well too for play time. Then there's always the famous hamster ball, which is a great way for your pet to get exercise.

Health Problems

There are only three health problems to look out for:

Hair loss: This can be caused by several different things. If you have multiple animals in one cage, they could be pulling each other's hair out. Check to see if there are any scratches or scabs. If there are, they should be separated immediately before they kill each other. Hair loss could also be caused by an allergy to the bedding. If your animal is in CareFresh, try aspen. If it's in aspen, try newspaper (tear it up into pieces no larger than 4"x4"). If that doesn't fix it and the animal is alone in the cage, it could be mites. If the hair loss is mostly around the back end, this is most likely the case. Email us for information on how to treat mites. If it's none of these, a vet is your best option.

Diarrhea: If you take your pet to a vet immediately, it might be saved, but this is improbable. But more often than not, the animal will not recover. Needless to say, we don't see this often. The best option is probably to have the animal humanely euthanized.

Dehydration and shaking: This one is also most likely incurable. This can be caused by numerous illnesses and usually indicates organ failure. If you can see the animal's bones already, then it will probably be most humane to euthanize the animal. Take it to the vet. The vet can tell you if there's anything they can do. But you'll have to go now if you want to have any chance at all of saving it. We rarely see this either.

Because two of these health problems are most likely deadly, it is important to point out that most pocket pets die peacefully in their sleep without any of the problems listed above. Hair loss and mites are rare as well. The problems listed above are simply the only ones we've ever encountered and so they're the only ones we can tell you about.