



Module 25: Understanding Hamsters and Gerbils

- Types of hamsters and gerbils
- Comparison to other rodents
- About hamster talk
- About gerbil talk

Hamsters and gerbils are cute rodents, but they also need proper care and understanding. This module covers the following topics:

- Types of hamsters and gerbils
- Comparison to other rodents
- About hamster talk
- About gerbil talk
- Gerbil behaviour
- Hamster behaviour

Understanding Hamsters and Gerbils - 4m40s

25.1 Types of Hamsters and Gerbils

Pet stores are the best place to find hamsters and gerbils for purchase as pets.

You may also be able to find more variety for sale in these locations, rather than online.

Hamsters

Hamsters are available in a variety of types.

Unlike, Gerbils that are often sold as one breed, you are usually able to find the breeds listed below in your local pet store:

- Syrian
- Standard
- Fancy
- Teddy Bear
- Chinese
- Dwarf

Hamsters are easy to care for and they will groom themselves. Hamsters tend to store more than they actually eat, especially if you give them too much food. As with other rodents, hamsters are instinctively programmed to store their food based on seasons. Hamsters and gerbils are known to hibernate for short periods.

Gerbils

Gerbils (*Meriones unguiculatus*) are rodents. There are several breeds of gerbils, including: Mongolian, Libyan, Egyptian, Indian, Jerusalem, Namib Paeba and Przewaiski's. The most common Gerbil sold in pet stores is the Mongolian gerbil. This gerbil is typically small with a white belly. They have enlarged front and hind legs, allowing your pet gerbil to be a good jumper.

25.2 Comparison to other Rodents

Hamsters

Hamsters are rodents and they have many similarities with others of the same kind. Hamsters come in a variety of colours including brown, grey, black and white. They are smaller than gerbils, measure 3-7 inches and weigh anywhere between 1-10 ounces. Beyond size difference, you will find that the tail is shorter and hamsters have smaller eyes. Their faces are more mouse-like, only with a shorter snout area and slightly wider ears. The rat is the largest of the rodents.

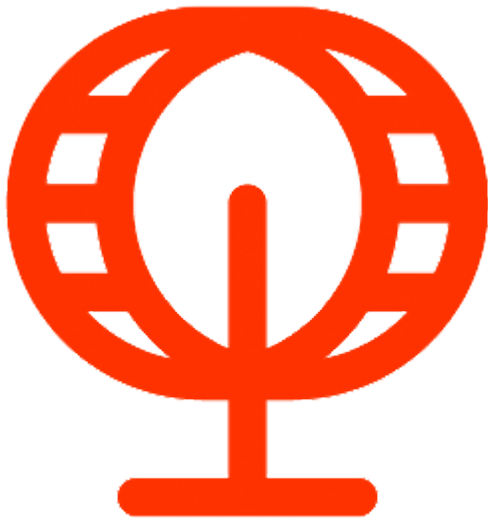
Gerbils

Gerbils are generally 8-10 inches long and weigh about 1.5-2.6 pounds. They are generally tan, brown or reddish-brown. Gerbils have a furry tail, which is different from the sparse hairs found on a rat tail.

Rats are also larger and have round, bulging eyes. Mice are much smaller than gerbils. Mice also have a smaller head and differently shaped ears. Their eyes are smaller and the tail is again rather bald.

Gerbils are also very social animals. It is recommended that you have two gerbils to keep your pets happy.

FACT



Roborovski Dwarf hamsters are the smallest type of hamster. Adult Roborovski Dwarf hamsters sometimes grow to as little as 2 inches long.

Source: thehamsterhouse.com

25.3 Hamster Talk



Hamsters are very clean and mildly social.

Hamsters are best socialised with animals they are already used to.

If you introduce two hamsters into the same cage, it is better that they are both the same sex and from the same litter. This will stop any problems you may see with both getting along. You also want to ensure there is no interbreeding. Hamsters will mate with any partner of the opposite sex, thus it is important that you make certain you have two hamsters of the same sex to avoid unnecessary litters.

If you do not buy two hamsters at the same time you will have difficulty socialising them. They are solitary and after three to four weeks the mothers even drive their offspring out, which is why they do not want or need another hamster. Your hamster will actually prefer your company to that of their own species.

Hamsters are curious critters; however, they can fear new things. They are more cautious than gerbils, which you will learn about soon. Your hamster wants to be safe with you, as well as in their cage. You need to be careful of the whiskers because this is his/her way of getting around. The whiskers tell them about smells, who and what belong to them, and thus the environment. Hamsters also have weak eyesight, so they rely more on their whiskers and smell. You will notice that your hamster's whiskers are in constant motion in order to get around obstacles and define the space they are in.

Hamsters are hoarders. They will spend hours burrowing, tunnelling and protecting their food.

Your hamster may tip its food bowl over and use it to hide the food, as well as put bed chips around and underneath the food. This is to protect it. Toys can also be buried as a way to protect and hide them.

Hamsters are very active, playful and fun to watch. They have a life span of about two and a half years.

25.4 Gerbil Talk



Gerbils tend to be extremely social and clean animals.

They constantly groom themselves, as well as any roommates you may have for them. Most gerbils will be odourless and non-threatening to other gerbils. They do not have the fight or flight mechanism that most animals do, meaning gerbils are not easily provoked or stimulated like other animals.

Your gerbil will display more curiosity than fear.

Noises that will typically send hamsters running will not affect your gerbil.

Gerbils are diurnal (awake during the day) and tend to have bouts of energy throughout the day that keep them up and moving. They will take short naps and be ready to play again. Your gerbil may decide to play at night, but will certainly have long naps in between.

It is best to pick up your gerbils together if you plan on having two. By starting off with two gerbils you will not have to worry about the introductions of a new friend later on. Most gerbils need to be introduced prior to 10 weeks of age to avoid any social or behavioural problems that can develop.

Gerbils really like companionship, but if they go beyond 10 weeks they may not socialise well. You will want to have a knowledgeable person helping you get two gerbils, to avoid having two of a different sex because they will breed if you have a male and female. Gerbils, like many rodents, are programmed to breed often and have short gestation cycles.

25.5 Gerbil Behaviour



Gerbils do not have to spend all their time in a cage.

Your gerbils, like other animals, originate from the wild. Their behaviour is instinctive. Currently there is little research to suggest you can house train your gerbil. However, this does not mean you cannot enjoy your gerbil around the house. You just need to clean up after them and be aware that there may be accidents, whether they occur on the floor, in your hand, or in your shirt pocket.

Gerbils are perfectly content to be in a shirt pocket. They like to bed down in a shirt pocket, take a little nap, or just explore the house with you. Gerbils can also enjoy the companionship you provide

them, whether they are in your pocket or hands.

When your gerbil is out of the cage, it is important that you make certain they cannot escape the room you are in or hide in anything, as you may have trouble finding them again.

Gerbils will explore everything. As long as they can jump, crawl, or walk somewhere they will go there. Your pet is also extremely curious, thus when it is out of its cage or aquarium your gerbil will be happy to wander around.

You should take your gerbil out often, such as once a day. The reason is to help your gerbil get used to your handling of it. The more it knows you then the less timid it will be when you take it out of the cage. More importantly, your gerbil is also an animal that likes fresh, unlimited air. Cages will offer plenty of air to your pet, but fresh air and unlimited space to roam will help with the monotony your pet has to deal with each day.

Gerbils do love to play. Your gerbil will enjoy running endlessly on a wheel, exploring tubes of various colours and extravagant housing. Your gerbil will burrow a bed and may move that bed a few times. You will notice that your gerbil will have a certain spot they like to eliminate in that is not near their bed. This behaviour is to keep their area clean.

Since gerbils are quite clean, with regards to grooming and home care, you will need to change their bed chips twice a week with two rodents, and once a week with one rodent, at least. You should also completely clean out the cage and disinfect it while your gerbil is exploring its larger home area.

Your gerbil will show its appreciation for being let out of its cage by enjoying the time and being less destructive with their claws inside their cage. If you do not want your gerbil roaming free out of its cage, there are balls you can purchase that they can run in contained, like a wheel. They may also groom in these balls.

A happy gerbil is one that is well socialised.

Be observant of behaviours and address with calmness and understanding. Since your pet cannot talk to you, you have to take special time to observe them or take them to the vet for medical evaluation.

For being such small animals, gerbils actually display a wide range of behaviours:

- Gerbils may thump their tails on the floor when they're threatened or fearful.

However, baby gerbils may thump their tails for play and practice. They may thump their tails at you as they may perceive you as a predator at first. Approach them calmly and quietly.

- At times, gerbils may display signs of aggression due to pain or illness.
- If you notice your gerbil chewing things in his cage, he may be sharpening his teeth. Leave cardboard tubes and specially designed chew toys for him to gnaw on.
- They are natural hoarders of food as this is in their genes. So don't be surprised if you see your gerbil hiding food in his cage.

25.6 Hamster Behaviour



Hamsters love to chew like most rodents.

Hamsters tend to chew more than gerbils. Your hamster will chew often to sharpen and chisel its incisors. The incisors grow constantly, so they need to keep them short in order to move around, eat and store items.

Hamsters are nocturnal, but can be awake during the day. Typically, a hamster will wake in the early evening to play, eat and groom. You will also notice your hamster is able to explore in the dark. A hamster will curl up in a ball to sleep.

You can expect your hamster to hibernate if your home temperature drops below 50 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit.

While gerbils tend to lack the fight or flight response, your hamster does not. A hamster will react with natural instincts if it feels threatened or in danger. The sense of smell can be used to detect danger. This same sense of smell can also alert your animal to something, such as a strange hand trying to reach him/her. Their instinct is to burrow, but if not there are two others ways to react. Your hamster may bite and then run for a place to hide. Alternatively the hamster may puff out its cheeks, lay down and play dead. Unfortunately, if you see this behaviour, it means your hamster is feeling anxiety and fear. It is causing stress, which can adversely affect your pet's life by shortening his/her already brief span.

Most hamsters will have a separate eating, sleeping and elimination area in their cage. They prefer their areas to be clean, which is why they will make certain to have specific designated locations.

The larger the cage, the more they can explore and play, which make them happier. Your hamster will want to explore outside of the cage. You should start handling your hamster frequently to help it get used to your smell. Your hamster will not try to hide when it becomes accustomed to you. It will even enjoy being in your pocket, on your lap, and running around your home. You need to have a secure area without places your hamster can crawl into and get lost. Furthermore, you want to ensure no other animals are in that location when you have your pet out. Lastly, a ball they can roll in can be fun, provide exercise and allows your hamster out of its cage for a different air quality.

Summary

Hamsters and gerbils are both rodents but have different behaviours and needs.

While hamsters can be solitary animals and live happy lives, gerbils are more social. They like to have a companion and be handled often.

Gerbils do not have the standard fight or flight response, but are more curious than hamsters.

Both rodents tend to have short life spans, like to chew, will hibernate and will groom often.

Both rodents also like to have separate areas for their food, sleep and elimination needs to keep a clean house. Gerbils are diurnal and hamsters are nocturnal.

[Tweet "I just completed Module 25 of the Pet Psychology Diploma Course"]
