

Gerbil care guide



woodgreen

Helping pets and their people

Introduction to gerbils

At Woodgreen, we love gerbils – so we're delighted that you're thinking about getting some! In this guide, you'll find lots of useful information about how to care for them and everything else to help you decide if they're the right pets for you (we hope they are). And if you already have gerbils, you might learn something new!

It's fair to say that gerbils are fascinating pets to watch. A lot can be learnt from seeing them dig and burrow to create a maze of tunnels. They're happiest living in family pairs or groups and love nothing more than whiling away the hours foraging together. Although these energetic little pets aren't always keen on being handled, they can still make a lovely and interesting addition to your family.

Fast facts

Male name: Buck. **Female name:** Doe.

Life expectancy: Three to five years.

Companionship: Gerbils prefer the company of their own kind and are most happy living in same sex family pairs, small groups or a neutered male with one or two females.

Accommodation: Gerbils are best housed in a large fish tank with a mesh lid or a converted Ikea Detolf display cabinet, as they prefer to live underground and need the ability to dig deep.

Diet: Gerbils are omnivores, so they require a well-balanced diet of seeds, grains, pulses and meat sources.

Health: They're generally quite healthy animals, with most illnesses being associated with old age or poor husbandry. Always carry out a health check on your gerbils each week to check for any changes in their behaviour, movement, toileting and general appearance.

Family friendly: Gerbils don't always enjoy being handled, but they can still make a great pet for families. They're truly fascinating to watch as they dig their burrows or explore their surroundings during free-range time (make sure it's a secure space to avoid escape incidents!).



Accommodation

When it comes to gerbil accommodation, the right amount of floor space along with depth for burrowing is crucial.

That's because much of their time is spent digging tunnels and foraging for food – it's in their DNA to keep busy.

The minimum tank size for two to four gerbils

100cm wide by 50cm deep by 50 cm high.

It can be tricky to find suitable gerbil housing, so we recommend building your own by converting a tank.



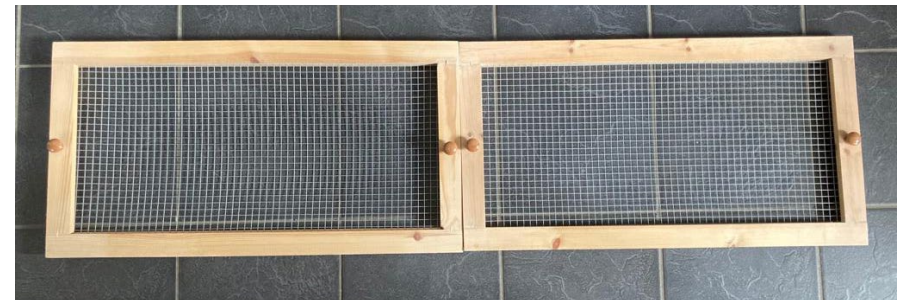
Building yourself?

That's great! Use either a 100cm (or larger) fish tank or a glass display cabinet like the Ikea Detolf laid on its back. Both of these require a homemade, mesh lid to ensure your gerbils receive plenty of fresh air.

A fish tank lid isn't suitable.

To make the lid, you'll first need to construct a wooden frame, similar to a picture frame, which will either sit on the inside ledges of the tank or snugly fit over the enclosure edges. Lids should be well made using wood screws, and not tied together. For larger glass cabinets, you may need to make the lid in two sections to avoid it being weak in the middle.

Once you've made the frame, use a staple gun to attach 1cm by 1cm welded mesh to the lid. Ideally, place this on the inside of the lid to avoid your gerbils chewing the wood. And that's it – you're sorted!



Where to place the tank

When you're choosing a location for your gerbil enclosure, make sure it's:

- away from windows and draughts.
- away from heat sources such as radiators, or ensure they're switched off.
- away from direct/constant sunlight, although the room will still need a natural daylight source.
- safe from other pets such as cats and dogs.
- safe from young, unsupervised children – avoid placing the enclosure in a used bedroom as gerbils can be active overnight and may disturb your sleep.
- away from constant loud noise such as a TV or music system.

Enrichment

You'd be forgiven for thinking that choosing toys and activities for your gerbils is easy, but it can actually be tricky. Many items which are fine for other rodents may be unsuitable and could even injure your gerbils. Plastic items should be avoided, as they can quickly be chewed into sharp points. But fear not, there are a number of safe and fun items that will help them stay fit, happy and healthy!

Your gerbils will enjoy:

- **Kitchen rolls** and cardboard tubes for running through and chewing.
- **Card boxes such shoe and cereal boxes.** Visit woodgreen.org.uk/pet-advice/general/hamster-and-gerbil-hotels/ to find out how you can make a simple gerbil hotel.
- **Wooden houses and bendy bridges**, as they make great nesting spaces for sleeping.
- **Apple or willow tree branches** and twigs. Your gerbils will have hours of joy clambering over these and gnawing on them.
- **Piles of forage or meadow hay.** Gerbils love to make their nest out of this once they've chewed it into smaller pieces.
- **Sand bath** – use a large glass or ceramic bowl filled with gerbil-safe sand for them to dust bathe in. The sand should not be dusty or contain any calcium.
- **Granite or ceramic tile** – this helps them keep cooler in the summer months.
- **Dig tray** or box filled with organic compost or coco soil.
- **12" wooden or metal solid upright wheel.**
- **Sturdy platforms** – these can be used to place heavy items such as the sand bath on top of.

Top tip – place a roll of unscented toilet paper into their enclosure. They'll have great fun ripping it up and taking it down into their burrows to make a cosy nest!



Bedding materials

Like us humans, gerbils like a comfy bed. And it's vital to use the correct bedding for your gerbils, otherwise it could have a negative effect on their health. Wood shavings or sawdust can be extremely harmful to your gerbils' skin and airway (see [page 19](#) for more details), and can give you an allergic reaction too!

Gerbils in the wild spend a lot of time underground digging burrows, and it's important for your pet gerbils to be able to express these behaviours which come naturally to them. For this to happen, they should have at least 8 to 10 inches (20 to 25cms) of bedding placed throughout their enclosure to enable them to create larger burrows and nests. Make sure there's enough room on the surface for them to reach up on their hind legs without touching the lid.



Digging:

Use two or more of these options mixed together for absorbency and stability

- Shredded card material e.g. Ecobale, Pillow Wad Eco-Nest, Greenmile.
- Hemp or aspen bedding such as Aubiose or Aspen Bed.
- Soft paper bedding, e.g. Carefresh, Kaytee Clean & Cozy or Small Pet Select paper bedding.
- White, soft tissue paper bedding such as tea bag bedding*.
- Soft, green hay.
- Organic soil or coco coir. This needs careful monitoring to prevent it from becoming mouldy or drying out and becoming dusty, both of which could affect your gerbils' lungs.

Options for nesting spaces

- Soft paper bedding e.g. Carefresh, Kaytee Clean & Cozy.
- White, soft tissue paper bedding such as tea bag bedding*.
- Soft, green hay.

*Avoid cotton-wool bedding and 'seed pod' bedding, as this can be very dangerous for your pets – it can become tightly wound around their body and legs causing severe injury.

Cleaning

Keeping your gerbils' enclosure clean is key to preventing serious health conditions. Here's how to keep it as immaculate-looking and safe as possible:

Daily	Every four weeks – full clean
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Top up any nesting materials they need such as hay or soft tissue bedding.2. Remove any fresh food (e.g. veg) they haven't eaten from the previous day.3. Change their water.4. Every other day, sieve their sand. <p>*Place any heavy toys into the enclosure first, or place them on top of sturdy platforms, before adding in the bedding. This will help to prevent them moving or falling and potentially harming your gerbils as they dig.</p>	<p>This may need to be done more often depending on how many gerbils you have:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Place gerbils in a secure carrier with plenty of bedding from their enclosure. Place the carrier in a safe, quiet space away from where you're cleaning.2. Remove wheel, sandbath, bowls, bottles and clean them with pet-friendly disinfectant.3. Remove as much clean bedding as possible from the enclosure, putting to one side for later.'4. Fully sweep out their enclosure and wipe down with pet-friendly disinfectant – allow to dry fully.5. Set up the enclosure with fresh bedding and place different toys in to keep things interesting.*6. Spread the clean bedding, which you put aside earlier, into their enclosure. This will help your gerbils settle.

Gerbil companionship



Gerbils are very sociable and thrive on the companionship of other gerbils. You'll often find them out foraging together or cuddled up in a ball when they're sleeping.

How many gerbils?

Similar to humans, gerbils can be very particular about their companions. They typically choose to live in family groups, just like they do in the wild.

It's usually best to keep gerbils in same-sex pairs or small family groups. But a male can be mixed with a female if castrated by an experienced gerbil-friendly vet – a good option to consider if he doesn't tend to get on with other male gerbils!

What to do if there's a fall-out

There's a risk with larger family groups (females in particular) that something called 'declanning' can happen. This is when two or more of the group start fighting, and it can lead to serious injuries if not spotted early. If this happens, those involved in the fighting will need separating from one another quickly, and both groups will need to be carefully monitored. Any injured gerbils should be seen by a gerbil savvy vet as soon as possible.

Introducing your gerbils to each other

The best chance of success

We recommend introducing gerbils to each other slowly through the 'split mix' method. This gives them time to get used to the sight and scent of one another before they're introduced in neutral territory – reducing the chances of a potential squabble. Lone adult gerbils can be very tricky to introduce to others, so be prepared that your gerbil may not get along with the first one they meet.



If you would like more information or advice on how to introduce gerbils together, please do get in touch or visit our website: woodgreen.org.uk/pet-advice/

Feeding your gerbils

Gerbils are omnivores, so they need both protein and vegetables in their diet. Feed your gerbil a good quality, complete dry mixture that provides the essential nutrients.

There are many good quality foods available for your gerbils. Choose one that has a good mixture of grains, seeds, pulses and a protein source such as dried meal worms.



How much to feed

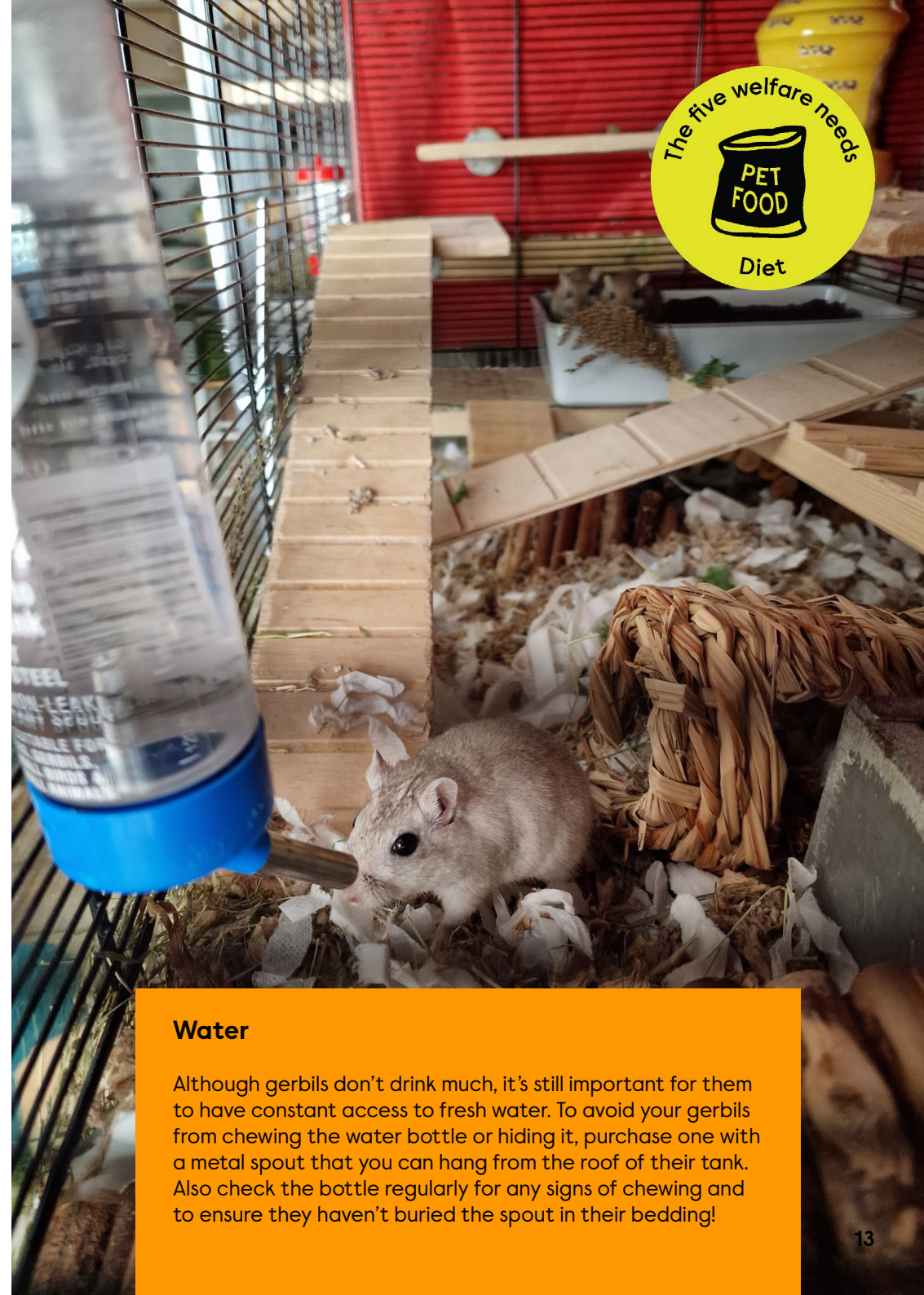
Feed your gerbils around 10g of dried food each, per day (around one tablespoon each). Gerbils are foragers and will spend hours digging through their bedding and searching through their enclosure

looking for food. To avoid your gerbils becoming obese and bored and reduce the likelihood of bickering over food, scatter their daily allowance around the enclosure rather than feeding in a bowl (which they're likely to bury anyway!).

Healthy treats (to be fed in moderation):

Avoid colourful chew sticks, mineral and salt blocks, as these can in some cases be harmful. Instead, give them occasional small amounts of healthy, natural food options, alongside their weekly diet, such as:

- Pasta, cooked or raw.
- Small pieces of fresh chopped vegetables such as broccoli, curly kale, peas, spinach.
- Small pieces of fresh chopped fruit like blueberries, apple, pear.
- Fresh mealworms – one or two at a time, unless your dry food already has these included.
- Pumpkin seeds.
- Apple wood – or other non-stone fruit tree wood to gnaw on.
- Willow wood (only Goat, Weeping or Pussy Willow).
- Dried herbs.
- Whimzee's.



Water

Although gerbils don't drink much, it's still important for them to have constant access to fresh water. To avoid your gerbils from chewing the water bottle or hiding it, purchase one with a metal spout that you can hang from the roof of their tank. Also check the bottle regularly for any signs of chewing and to ensure they haven't buried the spout in their bedding!

Handling your gerbils

Gerbils enjoy taking tasty treats from your hands, but many can be tricky to handle or may prefer interacting with you on their own terms. They can also be very fast and make sudden movements, so they're not always suitable for handling.

When they arrive in their new home, leave them for a few days to allow them to settle before trying to to hand feed them. When they are used to this, you can then try handling them or getting them out for some free-roam time.

How to pick up your gerbils

Ideally, if you handle your gerbils, do so during their active periods, and:

- Ensure they're alert and aware of your movements. Quietly talking to your gerbils can make them aware that you're there.
- Cup your hands under them and gently lift towards your body, letting them sit on your hands.
- Alternatively, place a tube/tunnel in front of the gerbil for them to walk into and lift carefully out, letting them walk out onto your hand in their own time.

Never try to pick gerbils up by their tail – this can result in damage or even loss of the tail.

Free-roam time

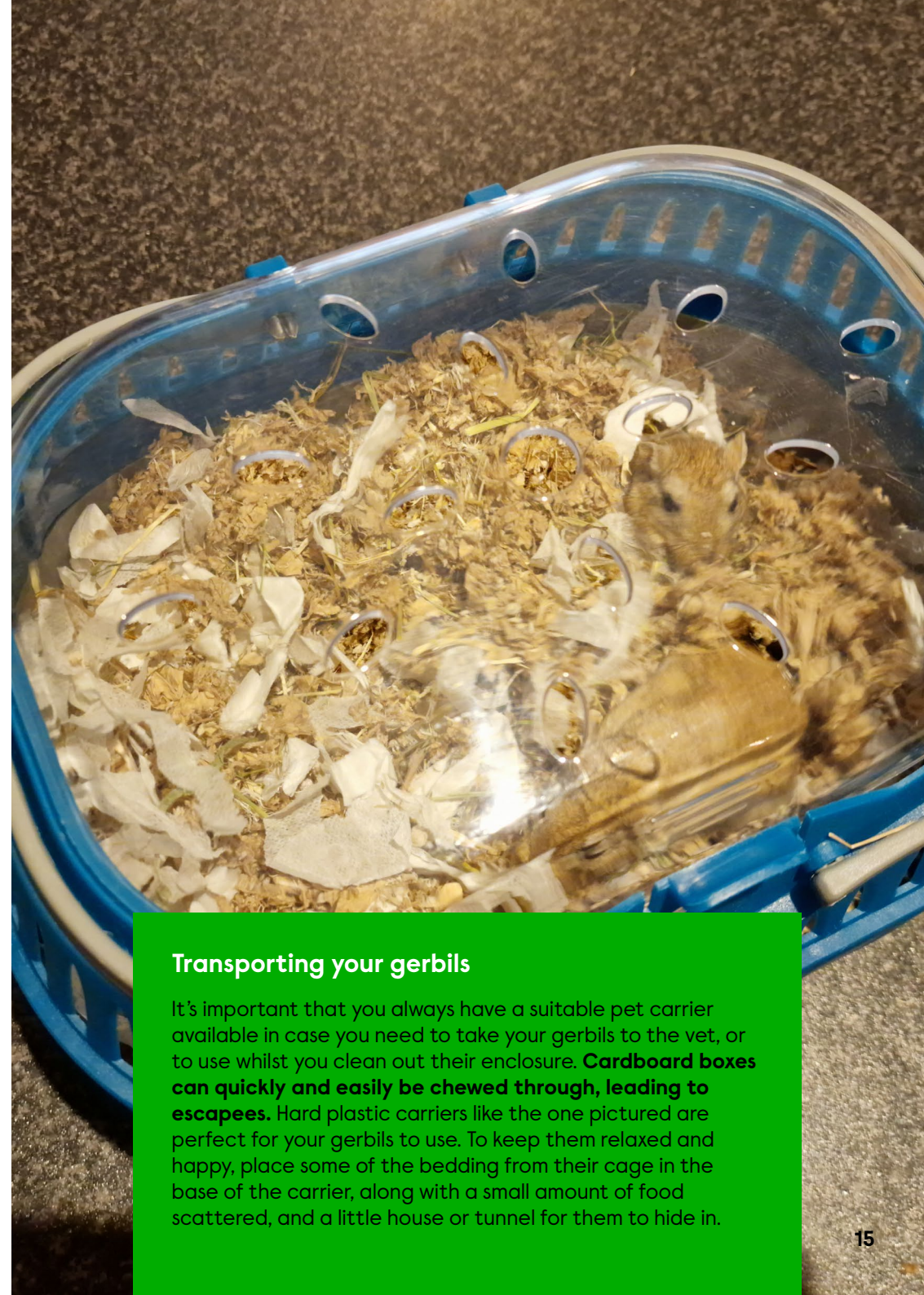
Your gerbils will love having extra space to run around and explore each day once they're settled. To do this safely, either:

- Place a plug in a clean, dry, empty bath and lay some towels across the bottom.
- Or use a pop-up fabric or Correx playpen like this one.



Place lots of toys and hiding spaces in there for them to explore, and sit in there carefully with them. This can be a great way of them getting used to you and will also provide a safe place for handling.

Never leave your gerbils unattended, as they're good escape artists!



Transporting your gerbils

It's important that you always have a suitable pet carrier available in case you need to take your gerbils to the vet, or to use whilst you clean out their enclosure. **Cardboard boxes can quickly and easily be chewed through, leading to escapees.** Hard plastic carriers like the one pictured are perfect for your gerbils to use. To keep them relaxed and happy, place some of the bedding from their cage in the base of the carrier, along with a small amount of food scattered, and a little house or tunnel for them to hide in.

How to health check your gerbil

Weight – use some small scales, like kitchen ones, to monitor their weight. Look out for unexpected or consistent weight loss/gain.

Ears, nose and mouth – these must be clean and free of any discharge, flaky or scabby patches, with no noisy breathing.

Their skin, coat and tail should be clean and healthy-looking.

Look out for:

- fur loss.
- red, flaky skin/dandruff.
- wounds or scratches.

Eyes – these should be clean, clear with no cloudiness or discharge, and bright.

Bottom and genitals – should be clean and dry.

Body – this should be free of any lumps, bumps, wounds or scabs.

Feet and toes – free of any sores, redness or signs of injury.

Nails – regular length, although most won't need to have their nails clipped as they'll naturally wear down whilst digging and exploring.

Teeth – top and bottom incisors (front teeth) should be a light yellow in colour, smooth and wearing evenly against one another.

The healthy gerbil

Health checking your gerbils

Make sure you health check your gerbils weekly and look out for any changes in their behaviour every day – they can be very good at hiding any health issues until they're really suffering. If you have any concerns, act quickly and contact your gerbil savvy vet.

Finding a vet

It's vital that you find a vet in your area who has lots of experience with gerbils. Most vets will see cats and dogs on a daily basis and will have an extensive knowledge of their needs. Other species such as gerbils will rarely be seen by most vets. So finding someone who has lots of experience of seeing, diagnosing and treating this species is very important.

- **Look for an Exotics Veterinary Practice** – they may have more experience and could be cheaper in the long term than other vets.
- **Talk to friends and family** who own or have owned gerbils to see if there are any vets in particular that they recommend.
- **Talk to veterinary practices** to find out if there are any gerbil savvy vets within the practice – don't be afraid to ask them how many they see on a weekly basis to help you decide whether they're the right vet for you.



Common illnesses

Parasites and fur loss

Parasites such as fur mites can be fairly common in gerbils who are housed on wood shavings or sawdust. If your gerbils are showing any of the below symptoms, it could indicate a parasite infestation, in which case you should contact your vet:

- Hair loss.
- Red, irritated skin.
- Severe dandruff.
- Small scratches all over the body.
- Visible lice or mites, which will look like orange or black dots in their fur.

Tumours and scent gland tumours

Gerbils can occasionally develop tumours as they get older, usually when they're around three to five years of age. Tumours can grow very quickly because gerbils have a fast-metabolic rate. When you handle your gerbils, check for unusual lumps and bumps on their body.

You may notice your gerbils have a gland under their belly. This should be checked regularly for any signs of inflammation, redness, bleeding or lumps. Scent gland tumours are more common in older males, but can also occur in females.

If you notice any lumps or changes to your gerbil, take them to your vet.

Fight wounds

As gerbils start to mature, they occasionally fight with each other. This may result in potentially serious and even fatal injuries. Health check your gerbils regularly, paying attention to their legs and face, as these are common areas for fight wounds.

Along with any health concerns mentioned earlier, if you notice wounds or injuries on your gerbils then you should take them to your vet as soon as possible. They'll be able to give them medications such as pain relief and antibiotics, and get them back on their paws.

Dental health

Occasionally, gerbils can suffer with overgrown incisors (the front teeth), this is more common in gerbils that have been bred poorly, have been involved in an accident where they may have fallen with an impact, or it could be due to bar biting if they are housed in an inappropriate enclosure.

Regularly check your gerbils' teeth to make sure they remain a good length and are wearing evenly.

Visit woodgreen.org.uk/pet-advice/gerbil/your-gerbils-health-what-to-look-out-for/ to learn more about your gerbil's health.

Looking for more expert pet advice?

We cover a range of different topics on our website – and not just for your small furry friends, but cats and dogs, too!

Not only that, but we also offer phone appointments, workshops, training classes, webinars and courses.

Find out more at [woodgreen.org.uk](https://www.woodgreen.org.uk),
call **0300 303 9333**
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