

# Hamster care guide



**woodgreen**

Helping pets and their people

# Introduction to hamsters

What's the secret to a happy hamster?

How can you care for them in the best way?

And is a hamster the right pet for you?

In this guide, we tackle these questions and more!

If you're thinking about getting a hamster, there are few different species to consider – from the Syrian (most common and largest), Winter White and Campbell's, to the Chinese and Roborovski. You can read more about them later in the guide.

Hamsters are fascinating pets for families and single pet owners alike. They all have individual characters and love exploring their surroundings. And with time and patience, they can even enjoy being handled and fed by hand.

## Furry facts

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

**Life expectancy:** One and a half to three years.

**Companionship:** All species of hamster should live alone. In the wild Syrian and Chinese hamsters live a solitary lifestyle, and although the dwarf species live together for reproduction and safety in the wild, as pets, fights often occur due to being in an enclosed space. These fights can leave hamsters with life threatening injuries so it is much safer to keep them alone.

**Accommodation:** Hamsters need to be housed in a large enclosure filled with suitable enrichment to keep them interested and active, along with deep bedding for them to dig and burrow in.

**Diet:** They're omnivores and require a well-balanced diet of seeds, grains, pulses and protein sources.

**Health:** Fortunately, they're generally quite healthy animals. Often, their illnesses are related to old age or poor care. Make sure you have a hamster savvy vet on hand in case your hamster ever needs veterinary attention.

**Family friendly:** As you may already know, they're also nocturnal – sleeping mainly in the day and most active at night. Like us humans, they may not always appreciate being woken up. This means they aren't best suited to a family who would like lots of interaction during the day. Hamsters can enjoy coming out to be handled when they're awake, and will happily take treats from your hands.

# Which hamster species is right for you?

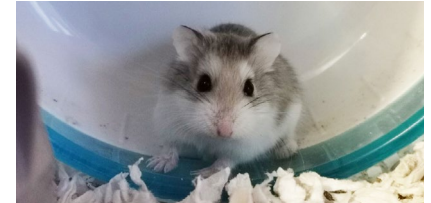
**Syrian:** These are the largest species and can be easier to handle because of their size.



**Chinese:** Once well socialised, they can be family-friendly. They're slightly smaller than the Syrian hamster and also have a longer tail than other hamster species.



**Roborovski:** At one to two inches in length, these are the smallest species of hamster. They're very fast and can be quite difficult to handle, which makes them unsuitable for regular handling, especially by young children.



## Dwarf (usually a hybrid between a Winter White and Campbell's):

A great choice for families after they're socialised, being smaller than a Chinese hamster. These are usually a hybrid between a Winter White and Campbell's, unless purchased with a pedigree from a reputable breeder.





# Accommodation

Hamsters may be smaller than your average pet, but you might be surprised by how much energy they have! They love to keep busy and will spend hours foraging for food and burrowing, as well as creating new territories and hides. And this means they need plenty of space to live their best life.

## The minimum cage or tank size for a hamster

### Syrian and Chinese hamsters:

100cm wide by 50cm deep by 50cm high\*.  
Bar spacing 1cm.

\*Female Syrian hamsters tend to be more energetic and active, and may need a larger enclosure to keep them happy.



### Dwarf and Roborovski hamsters:

100cm wide by 50cm deep by at least 40cm high.  
Bar spacing – 7mm is the safest option.



# Where to place your cage



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

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

### Did you know?

In the wild hamsters can travel miles each night gathering food which they carry back to their burrow in their pouches.

# Bedding materials

It's important to use the correct bedding for your hamster, otherwise it could have a negative effect on their health. Wood shavings or sawdust can be extremely harmful to a hamster's skin and airway (see **page 18** for more details), and it can give us humans an allergic reaction too!

Hamsters in the wild spend a lot of time underground digging burrows. With our pet hamsters, it's also important for them to be able to display this natural behaviour. To do this, they should have a minimum of six inches of bedding placed throughout the majority of their enclosure. They should also have a deeper digging space of at least 10 to 12 inches (25 to 30cms), to enable them to create larger burrows and nests.

Base of cage options (use a couple of the options mixed together for absorbency and stability)	Nesting/digging space options that hold the burrows well
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Soft paper bedding e.g. CareFresh, Kaytee Clean &amp; Cozy, Fitch, Small Pet Select.</li> <li>• Aspen, such as ProRep Aspen Bedding</li> <li>• Good quality hay such as Excel Feeding Hay</li> <li>• Hemp bedding such as Aubiose (non-fragranced).</li> <li>• Cardboard squares around 1cm square e.g. Ecobale.</li> <li>• Shredded card material e.g. Ecobale, Pillow Wad Eco-Nest, Greenmile.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Soft paper bedding e.g. CareFresh, Kaytee Clean &amp; Cozy, Fitch, Small Pet Select.</li> <li>• White, soft tissue paper bedding such as tea bag bedding* – great for creating deeper digging areas, as well as placing inside hiding spaces.</li> </ul> <p><b>*Avoid cotton wool types of bedding and 'seed pod' bedding as this can be very dangerous for your pets. It can cause pouch prolapses, intestinal blockages and can get tightly wound around their body and legs.</b></p>





# Cleaning

Keeping your hamster cage clean is key to preventing serious health conditions such as respiratory problems.

Daily – spot clean	Every two to three weeks – refresh clean
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Remove any wet areas in their sand bath if they use it as a toilet area.</li> <li>2. Replace dirty sand.</li> <li>3. Remove any fresh food (e.g. veg) they haven't eaten from the previous day.</li> <li>4. Change their water.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Place your hamster in a secure plastic carrier with plenty of bedding from their cage. Move the carrier to a safe, quiet space away from where you're cleaning.</li> <li>2. Remove any soiled toys or enrichment. Clean any bowls, bottles and the wheel, cleaning them with a pet-friendly disinfectant. Leave in any used, clean toys or enrichment.</li> <li>3. Check any burrows they have, removing any soiled bedding and old food. Clean out and replace their sand bath, especially if they use it as a toilet.</li> <li>4. Top up any bedding, replace any seed sprays and place any new/cleaned toys back in*.</li> </ol> <p>*Place any large and heavy toys into the cage first, before the bedding. This will help to prevent them moving or falling and potentially harming your hamster, if placed on top.</p>



Keep as much of their clean used bedding as you can in their enclosure - this will help to minimise stress when placing your hamster back in.

# Enrichment



Hamsters are known for sleeping a lot, but they certainly make the most of their waking hours, packing in an impressive amount of exploring, foraging and digging! So make sure you provide your hamster with toys and activities to keep them fit, healthy and happy.

## Hamster exercise ball

We **do not** recommend using exercise balls for any pet.

These can be disorientating and remove access to drinking water. Your pet can also get their toes/feet caught in them. However, you can use exercise balls as a hiding space in the cage by removing the lid and filling it with soft tissue bedding.

## Your hamster will enjoy:

- **Plastic, wooden or card tunnels and tubes** for running through.
- **Cardboard boxes** such as shoe and cereal boxes.
- **Plastic, ceramic or wooden houses and hides.**
- **Multi-chamber hides.**
- **A dig box or tray** filled with coco coir or coco fibre.



- **A sand bath** – use a glass oven dish filled with hamster safe sand.
- **Wheel** – Syrian and Chinese hamsters will need a 12" solid upright wheel. Other hamsters will need an 8" solid upright wheel.
- **Sturdy platforms** – great for placing heavy items on such as a sand bath, wheel or ceramic hides.
- **Cork logs.**
- **Grapevine, java branches.**





# Hamster companionship



## How many hamsters should you keep?

### Syrian and Chinese:

These species would live alone in the wild and can become very aggressive towards other hamsters, so should always be housed alone.

### Roborovski and Dwarf:

Although these species would live in groups in the wild, this is for the purpose of breeding and safety and in captivity, the space we provide will always be limited in comparison. Some owners have been lucky and kept 2 or more together, most owners find that fights break out and need to separate them. Hamsters will cause severe injuries to each other when fighting over territory which can lead to death, so it is safer to house them individually.





# Feeding your hamster

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

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

## How much to feed

**Syrian** – around 10g (one tablespoon) of dried food per day.

**Chinese, Campbell, Winter White and Roborovski** – around 5 to 8g (one teaspoon) of dried food per day.

As natural foragers, hamsters will spend hours digging through bedding and searching through their cage looking for food.

To avoid your hamster eating too much and becoming obese, while also keeping them stimulated, scatter their daily allowance around the enclosure rather than feeding them with a bowl.

## Healthy treats (to be fed in moderation):

Avoid colourful chew sticks, mineral and salt blocks as these can sometimes be harmful. Instead, stick to healthy, natural food options, alongside their weekly diet.

Also, try not to feed them in large amounts – portions equivalent to the size of their ear a few times a week will keep them satisfied.

## We recommend:

- Pasta, cooked or raw.
- Small pieces of fresh chopped fruits and vegetables such as broccoli, curly kale, strawberries and grapes.
- Small amounts of boiled egg.
- Pulses and cereals.
- Fresh mealworms – one or two at a time, unless your dry food already has these included.
- Apple wood – or other fruit tree wood – to gnaw on.
- Freeze dried chicken or salmon cat treats.
- Millet seed spray for birds.
- Whimzee's are great for gnawing on.

## Water – keeping your hamster hydrated

Daily fresh water is extremely important for your furry friends. Many hamsters prefer to drink from a bowl.

Bottles are suitable and can be provided in addition to this, but they may be tricky to keep clean, and often leak. Make sure your hamster can easily reach the spout by having it close to the base of the cage, or place toys underneath that they can easily climb on to reach it.



# Handling hamsters

When your hamster arrives, avoid handling them for a day or two to allow them to settle in. They have very poor eyesight, so any handling must be done carefully to ensure they don't fall and injure themselves. Syrian, Winter White, Campbell and Chinese hamsters can easily become hand-tame and enjoy coming out of their cage. Roborovski hamsters are not suitable for regular handling, especially by young children, as they're exceptionally fast and can make sudden movements. Due to their size, they can also be difficult to pick up. Spend some time getting to know your hamster before beginning to handle them. You can build up their trust by hand feeding them.



## How to pick up your hamster

Syrian hamsters in particular can feel very threatened by the sight of a hand suddenly hovering above them while they're resting.

Ideally, handle your hamsters during their active periods, and also:

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

## Free-roam time

Your hamster will enjoy having extra space to run around and explore each day. To do this safely, either:

- Place a plug in a dry, empty bath and lay some towels across the bottom.
- Or, use a pop-up fabric or Correx play pen.



Place lots of toys and hiding spaces in there for them to explore. Sitting with them (carefully) can be a great way of them getting used to you and will also provide a safe place for handling. **Never leave your hamster unattended, as they're very good escape artists!**



### Travelling safely with your hamster

It's important that you always have a suitable pet carrier available for taking your hamster 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 this one are perfect for your hamster 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.



## Keeping your hamster healthy

Make sure you health check your hamster 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 hamster savvy vet.





# How to health check your hamsters

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

**Ears, nose and mouth** – these should be clean and free of any discharge, fur loss, flaky or scabby patches. There should be no noisy breathing too.

**Bottom and genitals** – should be clean.

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

**Look out for:**

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

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

**Feet and toes** – should be free of any sores.

**Nails** – should be a regular length. Most will not need to have their nails clipped as they will naturally wear down whilst climbing and exploring. Older hamsters may need their nails trimmed occasionally to prevent them overgrowing and curling into their pads.

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

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



# Finding a vet

It's really important to find a vet in your area who has lots of experience with hamsters. Most vets see cats and dogs on a daily basis and will have an extensive knowledge of their needs, while other species such as hamsters will rarely be seen by most vets. So finding someone who has plenty of experience of seeing, diagnosing and treating these species is vital.

- **Look for an Exotics Veterinary Practice** – they may have more experience and be cheaper in the long term than other vets.
- **Talk to friends and family who own or have owned hamsters** to see if there are any vets in particular they recommend.
- **Talk to veterinary practices** to find out if there are any hamster 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 hamsters, particularly in Syrian hamsters. Incorrect bedding is one of the most common causes of this.

However, in some cases, your hamster may be suffering from hormonal changes or tumours, which may cause hair loss that appears to be symmetrical.

Consult your vet if your hamster is showing any of these signs of a parasite infestation:

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



### Wet tail

Wet tail is often brought on by stress – like changes in their surroundings or the presence of another animal in your hamster's environment. A build-up of bacteria in the cage can also cause wet tail, so regular cleaning is very important. Symptoms of wet tail include:

- Watery diarrhoea.
- Lethargy.
- Loss of appetite and sudden weight loss.
- A very strong smell of faeces.

Wet tail can prove fatal within days, and unfortunately doesn't respond well to treatment. If you suspect your hamster has wet tail, take them to your vet as soon as possible.

### Tumours

Sadly, tumours are fairly common in elderly hamsters and can grow

very quickly. Mammary tumours are the most prevalent and carry the highest chance of being cancerous.

When you handle your hamster, check for any unusual lumps and bumps on their body and abdomen. If in doubt, speak to a vet.

### Pyometra

Pyometra is an infection in the uterus which is more common in older females. Signs can include pus or blood coming from the uterus. With pyometra, it's important to get your hamster seen by a vet as soon as possible, as it can be life threatening. They'll then be able to determine whether your hamster is in season (they can produce a white discharge), or if it's pyometra. The ideal treatment for pyometra is a hysterectomy (spay) surgery, as treatment with medication isn't usually successful.





# 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**,  
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