

Gerbil Care



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Gerbils are friendly and gentle, and are often chosen to be a child's first pet because they are easy to care for, clean, and awake during the day. They're social and like to interact with people. They love to play with toys, providing lots of entertainment, especially if there is a group of them. Watching a group snuggle together is wonderfully endearing.

They may be fast moving, so some gerbils are not appropriate pets for small children, but with supervision, they may certainly make good pets for older children.



Photo courtesy of Depositphotos

Typically, gerbils are active in the morning as well as the evening, but may be sporadically active during the day. They usually live peaceably and well in small groups, whether the same or mixed sex, provided that they are provided ample space. They are intelligent and playful, and in the right situation can be extremely affectionate pets. Compared to other rodents, they have a minimal odor.

Gerbils will dig, play, and explore. A cage of multiple gerbils is incredibly entertaining. People who are squeamish about hairless rat and mouse tails, will enjoy the gerbil's furry tail.

They have a tremendous need to dig, and this must be accommodated for in their housing setup.

Gerbils are highly social and it is unhealthy to keep one gerbil in solitude for its life. Start out with at least two gerbils that have already been living together, as introducing new gerbils has to be done slowly.

Handling

Train your gerbil to enjoy being picked up and held. Extend your hand, palm up, towards your gerbil so he can climb on. You can encourage by putting a snack, like sunflower seed, on your palm. Be gentle and don't squeeze: he is a little guy. Close your hands around him so he won't fall or jump. Gerbils generally don't bite unless they are scared or hurt, so don't rush him. When your gerbil feels safe, he will want to spend more time being held. Before he trusts you enough to hold him, you can pick up whatever item he is hiding in, such as a toilet paper tube (often a favorite toy and hidey hole) or jar. Picking him up by the tail is a terrible idea because that will likely result in the need to amputate it.

Gerbils are prey animals and thus easily startled. If one hears a loud noise or other "threat," they thump their back feet and all the animals will immediately burrow into the bedding.

The more you handle your gerbil, the more affectionate they will be. Gerbils are social creatures and love to explore and play.

Housing

Odor can also be minimized through an appropriate cage. Cages should be quite large and well ventilated. Gerbils are burrowing creatures, and it's impractical to keep them in something other than an aquarium with a wire or mesh top. Wire caging with narrow bars allows for good ventilation, but can be messy given the significant 2-3 depth of bedding required to accommodate the digging behavior. A single gerbil should be housed in nothing smaller than a 20-gallon tank. Bedding should be deep, absorbent, and unscented, but not made of wood-based materials, which can elevate liver values as well as cause respiratory problems.

Many gerbil owners will provide 6-8 inches of bedding material for digging and tunneling. Recycled paper products, such as Carefresh brand bedding, are ideal. Shredded paper, especially that has been through a shredder, is also good (the shredder makes the paper good for tunneling). Scooping out waste materials daily and changing the entire cage weekly will help to keep the environment healthy as well as to minimize odors. Providing a two-story cage as you're seeing here will allow for improved ventilation, extra play space, and still accommodate this intense digging desire exhibited by most gerbils.

Gerbils prefer to have secluded areas in which to sleep, so plastic hideaways or flowerpots laid on their sides are a good idea. They will often take treasured items with them into their nesting or sleeping area. Torn paper towels are prized bedding material, and it is an inexpensive and easy thing to replace if it becomes dirty. As playful and intelligent creatures, they need items for environmental enrichment such as solid wheels (not the wire wheels that you often see, which can result in leg fractures), toilet tissue rolls for exploration, sisal rope climbs, and cornstarch baths are other favorites.

To clean the cage, remove the gerbils and everything else, wash with warm soapy water, rinse it several times, and let it dry completely before putting in fresh bedding. Clean everything that you return to the cage, such as water bowls and items in which to hide. A scrub brush will help clean the corners.

Chew toys such as wood from edible trees (such as apple trees) or some other natural wood and dog rawhides can also be popular toys. They like to gnaw, and can be destructive when outside the cage if you don't keep an eye on them. Avoid plastic toys as they may ingest what they chew off. Daily handling is really important, both from a stimulation standpoint and helping to tame them and make them more friendly. The more you handle your gerbil, the friendlier they will be!

Diet

A commercially manufactured rodent block should be the staple of the diet. Avoid commercial diets of seeds, nuts and dried fruits. Gerbils tend to pick out the parts that they like and discard the rest, so the diet becomes unbalanced and thus unhealthy; it's a bit like people eating only the olives in a green salad.

A rodent block diet can be supplemented with healthy people foods including oats, apples, asparagus, bananas, basil, blueberries, broccoli, carrots, cauliflower, celery, cherries, cranberries, cucumber, grapes, green pepper, kiwi, melon, okra, parsley, pears, peas, red peppers, spinach, squash, and strawberries, as well as small quantities of things like goji berries, unsalted nuts, shredded coconut, Kashi cereal, tofu, and hard-boiled or scrambled eggs.

It is important, however, to remember to avoid high-fat extras such as seeds or a lot of nuts. Introduce all new foods slowly in order to avoid diarrhea. Almost anything is safe to give gerbils in small quantities, but it's the quantity that tends to get us into trouble. Gerbils are small animals, and a portion for them is actually a very tiny amount.

They need fresh water daily, as the water in fruit is not enough.

Health

In general, an average life expectancy for the pet gerbil is approximately 3 to 4 years. Unfortunately, however, as a prey species, they do tend to hide illnesses, so when it is apparent to the owner in reality that they are sick, they've probably not been feeling well for an extended period of time. Most of our patients are significantly ill at the time they first come into the clinic, making both diagnosis and treatment more complicated. In general, however, gerbils are reasonably hearty and healthy animals.

Gerbils average seven litters per year and usually have five babies per litter. Talk to your veterinarian about altering your gerbils or you may end up with 35 offspring in the first year alone. If you don't wish to have a gerbil altered, consider a couple of groups of gerbils of the same sex. Separating bonded animals by placing them in different cages doesn't work because if a gerbil can smell or see but not touch its mate, they can become anxious and depressed.

They need regular bathing, at least once a week, in a sand bath. Buy chinchilla sand (not dust) and place some of it in a shallow bowl in the tank and they will bathe themselves. Once referred to as "desert rats," they do not like to get wet.

Their normal temperature is 98.6 – 101.3°F, and they weigh between 3 and 4.5 ounces.

Epilepsy

One of the most common presenting problems with gerbils is seizures. Gerbils are actually prone to epileptiform seizures, which can range from mild and hypnotic to grand mal. Some animals show symptoms consistent with catalepsy. Most of the episodes are brief and last for only a few seconds to a few minutes and may be initiated by changes in the environment, stress, or handling. Most animals resume normal activity immediately after the episode, and treatment is generally not necessary or even recommended. Some reports indicate that frequent handling of young animals may serve to decrease the frequency or severity of the episodes, and a genetic predisposition is suspected.

Nasal Dermatitis

Another common presenting problem in the gerbil is a nasal dermatitis. This nasal dermatitis is also known by owners as "sore nose" or sometimes also called facial eczema, and it's commonly encountered particularly in young adult animals. Affected animals have a facial alopecia surrounding the nares and upper lip with a varying degree of reddish-brown moist dermatitis. The primary cause is suspected to be a chemical irritation of skin by the porphyrin-containing Harderian gland secretions secondary to mechanical trauma caused by burrowing and face rubbing. Replacing the bedding with a nonirritating material, keeping the area clean, applying a topical antibacterial ointment, and reducing stress are the hallmarks of therapy in reducing this problem.

Cancer

Fortunately, compared to many other pet rodents, cancer is not as common in gerbils. Lesions are occasionally seen in older animals over the age of two. The most common concerns include squamous cell carcinoma of the ventral scent glands in males, ovarian granulosa cell tumors of the females, and in both sexes adrenocortical tumors, melanomas,

and squamous cell carcinomas. Although not malignant, cystic ovaries are reasonably common, and can easily present with symptoms that may lead the veterinarian to suspect neoplasia.

Tail lesions are commonly seen in gerbils, especially those that are handled in family situations with young children. They typically occur after an injury. Rough handling can readily result in a degloving injury, which can be particularly severe. This is something to keep in mind when your gerbil tries to make a dive off the table and you go to catch it. It's also best not to restrain your gerbil by the tail.

All in all, gerbils can make terrific pets with the right social circle and care.

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