

Gerbil

Meriones unguiculatus



LIFE SPAN: average 2-3 years

AVERAGE SIZE: body 4 inches, tail 4 inches



written by an expert in the pet care industry and approved by a qualified exotic veterinarian

the information on this care sheet is a basic overview and not a substitute for veterinary care. For more information and to find a qualified exotic mammal veterinarian, go to www.AEMV.org

WILD HISTORY: Native to several desert areas around the world, but most famously, Mongolia. Gerbils are tunneling rodents and are primarily diurnal in nature.

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS: Gerbils are small, sleek rodents with large black or pinkish eyes. Their ears are small and whiskers are quite dominant. The front paws are small, but sensitive, with claws. The back feet are long and powerful. The tail is long with a tuft at the end. The tail grows quickly to about 2-3 inches in the first six weeks of a gerbil's life, it then eventually reaches about 4 inches by the time it is one year old. The gerbil's Latin name roughly translates to "little clawed warrior", although they are gentle and sweet. They range in color from white to brown "agouti" - brown with black ticking at the ends of the hairs. The gerbil's sense of hearing is about five times greater than that of humans.

NORMAL BEHAVIOR & INTERACTION: Very social & engaging gerbils are generally very gregarious. As adults, they can be territorial, so to reduce fighting, introduce before 8 weeks of age (best kept in pairs or groups of four). Gerbils are easily tamed, even if they are difficult at first. The more you handle and work with your gerbil, the tamer it will become. Gerbils rarely bite, and unlike hamsters, are active during the day. Gerbils love to dig and tunnel, creating different rooms underground. Their long whiskers help them identify the different tunnels that they create. Place your pet's cage in a place in the home where it will be around the family, yet protected from direct light, drafts and excess noise during the day. Also be sure it is high enough to be out of reach of dog noses and small children's hands. Gerbils are prey animals and can feel threatened by large bodies hovering above them or in their faces.

FEEDING: Gerbils are omnivores (vegetarians / grain eaters) and will eat an occasional insect such as crickets or mealworms. Commercially prepared gerbil diets are available, they are made of pellets, seeds, grains and dried vegetables; a good food should contain about 12% protein and 6-8% fat. Avoid excessive sunflower seeds to reduce likelihood of obesity. Alfalfa hay can be provided for grazing and is a good source of calcium for nursing females. Replenish the food in your gerbil's cage when most of it is gone; they will eventually eat the pieces they desire less.

Gerbils are notorious for food hoarding. They will take food to various places in the cage for storage, bury it and often forget about it. For this reason it is important to spot clean your gerbil's cage daily to remove fresh foods that may become spoiled. Seeds and pellets can remain in their hiding spots. **FRESH FOODS:** Healthy, fresh fruits, vegetables and grains can also be fed to your gerbil. Offer these treats in small amounts, as they may cause diarrhea if fed in too large an amount.

**** Please avoid feeding sugary treats such as yogurt drops or honey sticks. These treats contain far too much sugar and can cause disease. Do not give your gerbil cabbage, potatoes, onions, uncooked beans, chocolate, candy or junk food.**

SUPPLEMENTS: If fed a balanced diet, supplements are not necessary for your gerbil.

WATER: Clean, fresh water must always be available and should be changed daily. All water should ideally be free of fluorine, chlorine and heavy metals. We recommend that you use unflavored bottled drinking water or bottled natural spring water. If tap water is used, you should treat it with a water conditioner. If you do not want to chemically de-chlorinate the water, you can leave an open container of tap water out for at least 24 hours with exposure to ultraviolet light. Do not use distilled water, which can cause severe medical problems, since it lacks minerals that are essential to important body functions

RECOMMENDED SUPPLIES:

- Cage
- Water bottle
- Food bowl
- Food
- Bedding
- Hide house
- Running Wheel
- Chew toys

HOUSING & ENVIRONMENT: Many different types of rodent cages are available at the pet store. Do not buy the smallest cages thinking that because the pet is small, it does not need much room. Gerbils love to run, tunnel and explore. A larger cage will allow it to create several "rooms" as gerbils will do. They like to have separate bedrooms, food storage areas and play areas. A ten-gallon glass tank is an excellent sized cage for two gerbils. A twenty-gallon is best for four gerbils. These cages will allow you to choose different toys and hiding places that can be interchanged within the cage. Choose several hiding places, a solid walled plastic wheel (this may be become buried by your enthusiastic nest builders) and chew toys. Small cardboard boxes and cardboard paper towel rolls will also be appreciated. When designing your cage set-up, be sure to include a mesh wire top for the cage that can be secured snugly with cage "locks". Gerbils are escape artists and will find a way to escape if it is possible. Lastly, choose a smooth, flat rock that your gerbils will use as a "look-out" perch. One gerbil will often keep watch over the others and signal "danger" by drumming their big back feet on the rock. The plastic cages with tube accessories are **not** ideal cages for a gerbil. Gerbils are much more avid chewers than hamsters, and they will quickly chew through a plastic cage. Also, these cages do not give enough room for the depth of bedding your gerbil will need in order to dig tunnels and create "underground" rooms.

HIDE HOUSE: The hide house is extremely important to the gerbil, and will most likely become your pet's main 'bedroom'. Gerbils will not often relieve themselves inside the hide house or 'nest', so it is not necessary to disturb the nest to clean it daily. Cleaning of the hide house can be done during the more intensive bi-weekly cleaning. Your gerbils will most likely bury the house and use it to create an "underground" room.

WATER BOTTLE: A full water bottle must be available at all times; refill it daily. Be sure to clean out the inside of the bottle thoroughly during the more intensive cage cleaning sessions every week. Water bottles will often become slimy inside, which will in turn harbor harmful bacteria. Your pet will most likely chew a bottle inside the cage, so be sure to attach the bottle to the outside of the cage. Check the straw daily for any blockages to make sure your pet always has access to the fresh water. If you cannot place the bottle on the outside of the cage, purchase a metal water bottle guard. This will keep him or her from getting to the bottle.

BEDDING: We recommend an aspen bedding or soft recycled newspaper bedding such as "Carefresh". None of these choices will cause allergic reactions or respiratory distress *and* are easy to clean. Gerbils will greatly appreciate a mixture of all the bedding types. **DO NOT use cedar chips, as they contain dangerous phenols, which are toxic to your pet.** Place enough bedding in the cage so your pet can happily tunnel underneath it. Spot clean your pet's cage daily by simply removing the soiled portions of bedding.

TOYS: Several types of toys should be available to your gerbil. Chewing toys such as wooden hamster/gerbil toys (available at the pet store), hide houses, wheels, "run-about" (clear plastic balls for your gerbil to run around the house in), cardboard boxes, paper towel tubes and dried untreated fruit tree branches are all excellent toys for your pet. Gerbils must chew constantly in order to wear their teeth down, which grow on a continual basis. Therefore, toys that allow the gerbil to chew and wear those teeth down are invaluable. Stick to toys bought at the pet store, as these are generally made of pet-safe materials.

CAGE TEMPS: normal room temperature (60-70F).

HABITAT MAINTENANCE: Daily maintenance should consist of spot cleaning by removing soiled substrate, cleaning water bowl thoroughly and wiping glass clean. The entire cage should be cleaned thoroughly at least once every month with:

- A mild dishwashing liquid in warm water
- Vinegar & water (1:8) or bleach and warm water (1:32)
- Cage "furniture" should also be scrubbed clean with the same dilution.
- Rinse off all soap and bleach thoroughly with plain water before re-introducing your pet to its enclosure.
- NEVER MIX VINEGAR AND BLEACH - IT CREATES A TOXIC SOLUTION

GROOMING & HYGIENE: It is not necessary to clean or bathe your gerbil. They are extremely neat and will groom themselves! If it seems as if your pet has not been grooming him or herself, he may be ill.

SIGNS OF A HEALTHY ANIMAL: Healthy gerbils have a lean body and smooth, even fur with no bald patches. The nostrils, under-tail area, under-chin area, ears and eyes should be clear and free of discharge - fur should not be damp or stained in any way. Your pet should have bright eyes; teeth should be even and well aligned with no staining around the chin; breathing should be even and not labored,

wheezing or gurgling sounds. Healthy gerbils are very energetic and busy. We recommend physical exams every year with an exotic pet veterinarian. If your vet sees your pet regularly, many common conditions that afflict your pet can be caught and treated early.

SOME COMMON PROBLEMS THAT REQUIRE VETERINARY EVALUATION INCLUDE:

HEALTH ISSUE:	PHYSICAL SIGNS:
Enteritis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diarrhea • Wet bottom and tail • Lethargy, irritability • Loss of appetite
Mites, lice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of hair • Bare spots on skin • Small red sores • Scratching
Traumatic injury	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open wounds • Lameness • Lethargy
Abscesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Swellings on the face or body
Ringworm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Circular ring of missing fur • Might have crusts or scabs • Might be itching • CAN be transmitted to humans

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