

Owning gerbils can be fun and very rewarding, but it is a big responsibility and a long-term commitment. Did you know gerbils can live on average 3-4 years?

Providing for all your gerbil's needs is the best way of ensuring their physical and mental wellbeing, resulting in a long and healthy life. Here are some guidelines for offering your gerbils the best care:



Provide a suitable and stimulating living environment



Choosing the right home for your gerbils is important as this is where they will spend much of their time. Gerbils love to dig and create intricate tunnel systems and nests, for this reason the enclosure needs to allow for deep bedding. Many small rodent enclosures and “gerbilariums” commonly marketed for gerbils are too small or do not provide a deep enough base for digging. Our minimum recommended enclosure size for a pair of gerbils is 100cm x 50cm x 50cm which should allow for at least 20cm of deep bedding, although bigger is always better! Repurposing old fish tanks or IKEA Detolf units can make perfect homes for your gerbils; secure, ventilated lids can be made from a wooden frame and mesh. Wire or wooden “toppers” can be added to enclosures to increase the available space. Care should be taken to avoid enclosures with barred or meshed platforms as the gaps can cause injuries to your gerbils, these areas can be covered using cardboard or wood to make them safer. Please ask the Small Animals Team if you need any help choosing an appropriate enclosure.



Gerbils spend a lot of their time in burrows and in the wild would have a main sleeping chamber with multiple food stores. Gerbil burrows in the wild can be one meter deep and several meters across! To try to replicate this as much as possible in captivity, the bedding you chose must be deep enough to allow for plenty of burrowing and be able to hold its structure to prevent the tunnels from collapsing. The bedding should be at least 20cm deep and enrichment should be scattered throughout.

Gerbils require a monthly complete clean out of bedding where the enrichment can be moved around or changed. Cleaning more frequently may cause more harm than good as destroying their burrows can be quite distressing for gerbils and fresh bedding can result in unwanted territorial behaviours - a small amount of old, used bedding can be kept and scattered in the fresh enclosure so that the enclosure still smells like them. A sand bath should be provided to keep their fur in good condition, this can be changed regularly or sieved to remove any faeces. Gerbils love to chew so providing wooden or cardboard enrichment is the safest option; plastic shards can cause injuries or blockages if your gerbils ingest them.

An enriching gerbil enclosure will have:

- A mixture of safe substrates that can maintain its shape: our recommendations are below
- Hides filled with a suitable bedding material (teabag or tissue bedding)
- Wooden or cardboard enrichment such as tunnels, bridges, logs, tubes, boxes etc
- A wooden or metal wheel (minimum 28cm), this is optional depending on your gerbils' preferences

- Sand bath: special bathing sand is required to allow the gerbils to keep their coat clean and help to prevent mites
- A food and water bowl; water bowls are recommended over bottles as they allow for natural drinking and are easier to clean



Bedding

recommendations:

- Shredded cardboard such as EcoBale or Bedkind
- Paper-based bedding such as Carefresh, Small Pet Select, or teabag bedding
- Megazorb
- Hemp bedding such as Aubiose
- Dust extracted soft hay



We recommend avoiding most wood shavings or sawdust as these are known to cause respiratory issues in small animals, cotton wool-style bedding should also be avoided as it can cause blockages if ingested. Please also avoid purchasing enrichment made of compressed wood shavings as these are dangerous if consumed. If you would like any recommendations, please contact the Small Animals Team.



Preserve their health by protecting them from pain, injury, and disease



Finding a gerbil-savvy vet can be difficult, it is a good idea to check that your vet is able to treat them or seek a specialist exotic vet.

Check your gerbils for signs of injury or illness every day and seek veterinary advice if necessary.

- Check teeth and nails are not becoming overgrown
- Check eyes are clear and bright
- Check coat and skin for signs of mites, bald patches, sores, or lumps
- Check nose for discharge and for clear breathing
- Check for a clean and dry bottom
- Monitor faeces and urine for any changes from the norm
- Check scent glands on stomach



Provide a nutritious diet and fresh water



Gerbils are omnivorous and require a well-balanced diet of seeds, grain, pulses, and protein sources. There are many different premixed diets and pellets on the market, check the labels and select those that are specific to gerbils with good quality ingredients. Muesli diets are recommended for small rodents rather than pellets as they would naturally eat a wide range of seeds and forage. Gerbils should be offered 1 tablespoon of food per day per gerbil. Gerbils can also be given very small amounts of fresh fruits and vegetables as treats; these should be given in moderation as too much can cause diarrhoea.

Healthy treats include:

- Fresh/dried flowers: dandelion, clover, rose, hibiscus etc.
- Fresh vegetables and fruit: leafy greens (kale, spinach, herbs), pepper, broccoli, apple, peas, berries, banana
- Millet sprays
- High fat seeds such as pumpkin and sunflower seeds
- Pasta (raw or cooked)
- Live or dried insects
- Dried goji berries
- Safe twigs/branches (apple, willow, hazel)



Avoid any commercial stick treats with honey as these are too sugary and can cause diabetes and obesity.



Promote natural behaviour and provide appropriate companionship



When designing the layout of your gerbil enclosure you should incorporate as much enrichment as you can to promote natural behaviours. Gerbils are inquisitive and enjoy exploring new enrichment items. Gerbils are fantastic diggers and spend much of their time creating a network of tunnels leading to bed chambers and food stores. Scattering wooden tunnels, bridges and houses throughout your gerbils' enclosure will help them in creating a fun burrow. Mixing substrate in layers will also allow your gerbils to experience natural digging behaviours, you will often see them collecting bedding in their mouth to create a cosy nest!

Enrichment for small animals does not need to be expensive. You can use cardboard boxes as houses, toilet rolls as tunnels, and you can add scrunched up newspaper as material for the gerbils to shred and use throughout their burrows. Avoid using plastic in your gerbil enclosure as they are likely to chew this and leave plastic shards throughout their enclosure or ingest it which can make them very ill. Promoting natural foraging behaviours by scatter feeding is a stimulating activity for them.

Gerbils are an intelligent, social species and should be kept in same sex pairs or a neutered male with a female. Small groups of gerbils can work however a larger enclosure would be required and the risk of declanning is much higher, so pairs are recommended. Gerbils naturally live in small family groups, so we do not recommend housing one on their own as this can be very stressful and isolating for them. Gerbils form a hierarchy with dominant and subordinate individuals, it is essential to provide enough hides, food, and water sources to prevent any bickering or "declanning". Gerbils enjoy nesting, grooming, and foraging together and can communicate together with



vocalisations and body language. They will thump their back feet when they feel threatened or nervous. Adult gerbils can be aggressive towards newcomers so careful introductions are required to keep the gerbils safe. Female gerbils are often more territorial towards each other than males, however they can be bonded successfully with the right personalities and enough time dedicated to building their bond. If you are interested in bonding your gerbils, please contact the Small Animals Team for appropriate methods.

Providing opportunities to chew is both mentally stimulating and helps to keep your gerbil's teeth in good condition. Rodent teeth grow continuously throughout their lives and chewing is a large part of their natural behaviour, their teeth need to be worn down by providing them with an appropriate diet and safe wood-based enrichment. Hay is a great option as they love chewing it into smaller pieces and provides additional structural support for their burrows. You can also add branches from various safe trees such as willow, hazel, or fruit trees.

Secure playpens, such as wire collapsible pens, can make wonderful play areas for gerbils under supervision. It gives them an option to explore a new area and you can change enrichment and layout frequently. This is a good alternative to exercise balls which are considered stressful and can cause injuries. It also provides somewhere secure while handling a less confident animal.

While some gerbils may not tolerate handling, others can enjoy the experience when handled appropriately. We recommend letting small animals settle for a few weeks before starting the handling process, beginning by rubbing



bedding from your gerbils' enclosure on your hands and placing your hands in the tank to let them approach you. Physical handling will need to start low to the ground (within a playpen or enclosure) is a good place to allow your gerbils to gain confidence with handling while keeping them safe should they run away. Ensure that when handling you fully support the whole gerbil's body. Children should always be supervised by an adult when handling and gerbils should never be held by their tail. Whilst gerbils may not always be keen on handling, they are fun for all the family to watch whilst digging their tunnels and gathering bedding for their nests.