

Owning a hamster is great fun and very rewarding, but despite their small size, it is a big responsibility. Did you know that different species of hamster tend to have different temperaments?

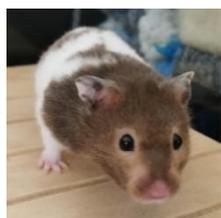
Providing for all your hamster's needs is the best way of ensuring their physical and mental wellbeing, resulting in a long, healthy life. Here are some guidelines for offering your hamster the best care:



Knowing your hamster



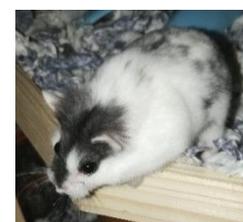
There are several species of hamster that can be available for adoption; understanding the different species and their housing requirements and temperaments is important when choosing which hamster would be most suitable for you. For example, Syrian hamsters tend to be slower and more handleable whilst most dwarf species are not recommended for children as they can be quick and nippy. The average lifespan of a hamster is between 2-3 years depending on the species.



Syrian hamster - These are the more common and largest of the hamster species available and are the most diverse in terms of colouration and coat length. Syrian hamsters tend to be more handleable than the dwarf species, however, not all individuals will tolerate handling and can be vocal when scared. Syrian hamsters are more capable of climbing which should be reflected in their enclosure design; they also enjoy digging. Syrian hamsters should be kept alone, they are very territorial and will fight with enclosure mates.



Campbell's and Winter White hamster - Both of these species are dwarf hamsters - most available for adoption are hybrids of both species but they require the same care. They are both poor climbers so benefit from more enrichment low to the ground and burrowing or digging opportunities. They are quicker than Syrian hamsters and usually less handleable so not recommended for children. We recommend keeping these species solitary.



Roborowski "Robo" hamster - The smallest hamster species that you will see available, these dwarfs are quick and energetic which means they are not suitable for young children or general handling. Robos are also not the most agile so require low enrichment to prevent injuries from falling. Due to their small size, they require smaller bar spacing than that of the other hamster species. Individuals from this species should be kept alone.



Chinese hamster - The most unusual hamster and not often seen available for adoption. They have a short tail and look a little mouse-like, they are often shy hamsters and not ideal for handling. They are very good climbers so benefit from lots of climbing enrichment and hammocks. Chinese hamsters should be kept separately to prevent fighting.



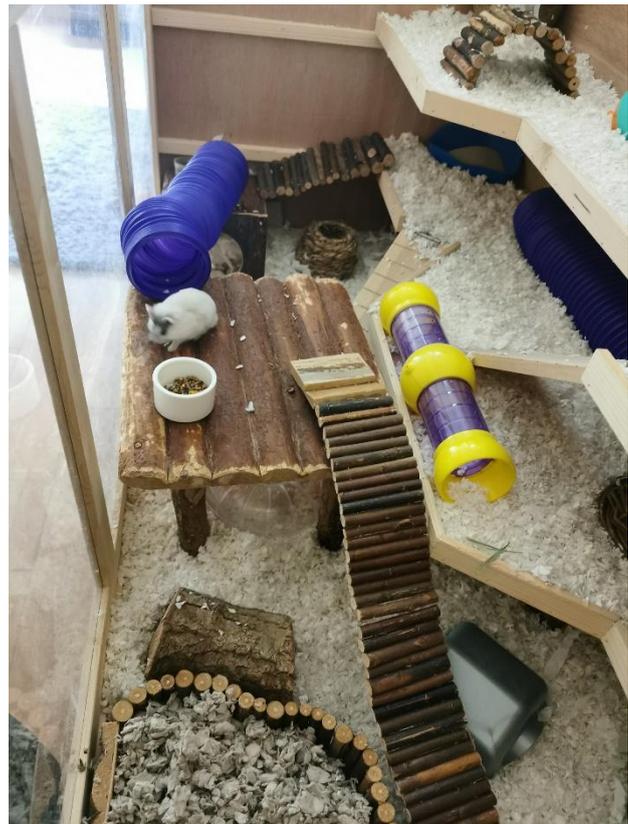
Provide a suitable and stimulating living environment



All hamsters require a minimum enclosure of **100cm x 50cm x 50cm (L x D x H) or 3.2ft x 1.6ft x 1.6ft**. Hamsters are extremely active animals that would naturally roam across large territories, they benefit from the largest enclosure you can offer. If the space is unstimulating or does not encourage them to use their natural behaviours, they may start to exhibit stereotypical behaviours such as bar biting or over-grooming. There are various suitable enclosures on the market made from plastic, metal and glass, and some designs may suit individual hamsters better than others. Bar spacing is an important aspect to consider when purchasing an enclosure, Syrians and large dwarf hamsters require a bar spacing of maximum 0.9cm while smaller dwarf hamsters require a maximum of 0.6cm to prevent any escapees. Not all enclosures available are large enough for hamsters, please ask the Small Animals team if you need any help choosing an appropriate enclosure.

An enriching hamster enclosure will have:

- A safe substrate with an area at least 25cm deep for digging: our recommendations are below
- Hides filled with a suitable bedding material (teabag or tissue bedding)
- Enrichment such as tunnels, bridges, logs, ladders, dig box etc
- Hammocks or hanging objects for those hamsters who are good climbers
- A wheel (30cm for Syrians, 21cm for dwarf species)
- Sand bath: special bathing sand is required to allow the hamster 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 Back to Nature, Carefresh or Megazorb
- Kiln dried, dust extracted wood chip bedding such as Pillow Wad
- Hemp bedding such as Aubiose

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



We recommend registering your hamster with a hamster-savvy vet. It is a good idea to check that your vet is able to treat hamsters or seek a specialist exotic vet.

Check your hamsters 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 (dampness or discharge could be a sign of “wet tail”)
- Monitor faeces and urine for any changes from the norm
- Abnormal lumps and tumours are common in older animals

If the temperature is too cold, hamsters can go into a state called “torpor” which is similar to hibernation and dangerous if left untreated. Making sure your hamster is kept in a warm area away from drafts will help to prevent this, along with plenty of warm bedding material in their nests.



Provide a nutritious diet and fresh water



Hamsters are naturally omnivorous, a good quality diet should include seeds, pulses, grains, and protein in the form of dried insects (such as shrimps or mealworms) or egg biscuit. There are a variety of mixes and complete pellets available, check the labels and select those with good quality ingredients.

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, grapes, banana
- Pasta (raw or cooked)
- Cheese/Yoghurt (very small amounts as high in fat)
- Peanut butter (very small amounts as high in fat)
- Cooked lean meats (turkey, chicken, salmon)
- Unsweetened cereals
- Live or dried insects
- Dog biscuits
- Safe twigs/branches (apple, willow, hazel)

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



Promote natural behaviour



Hamsters are nocturnal which means that they are most active at night. They are incredibly active animals and would naturally roam over large areas and spend a lot of time exploring, foraging, and making nests and tunnels. Without a stimulating environment they can develop stereotypic behaviours such as pacing, bar chewing, and over-grooming.

Hamsters tend to be solitary animals and do not benefit from companionship unlike many other small animals. Dwarf species can be kept in family pairs or small groups however this is not recommended and can end in fights which would require individuals to be separated. If you have a pair or small group, monitor for squeaking, chasing and injuries. It is not recommended to introduce new animals to an existing animal or group.

Changing the enclosure's enrichment, substrate and design will encourage exploration and natural behaviours. Enrichment does not need to be expensive; cardboard tubes and boxes or old plastic children's toys can provide your hamster with hours of entertainment. Providing foraging opportunities, such as scatter feeding, which provides a lot of mental stimulation over using a food bowl. Trying new treats and fresh foods can also be a simple and effective enrichment tool. When given the opportunity, many hamsters love to dig and create their own tunnel systems. A deep substrate would allow plenty of chances to dig, we suggest an area of substrate around 25cm deep. A deep area can be created using plastic containers or sectioning off an area using wooden bridges.

Providing opportunities to chew is both mentally stimulating and helps to keep your hamster's teeth in good condition. As with many other rodents, hamsters' teeth will continue to grow so providing them with something tough to chew will reduce the chance of dental problems. Chews can include safe branches (apple, pear, hazel, willow, hawthorn etc), wooden enrichment, hay or providing hand-cut grass.

Secure play pens, such as pop-up ball pits, can make wonderful play areas for hamsters 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 hamsters (especially dwarf species) 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 low to the ground (within a play pen or enclosure) is a good place to allow your hamster to gain confidence with handling while keeping them safe should they run away. Ensure that when handling you fully support the whole hamster's body.