

Taming and Handling

When you get your hamster home, leave it alone for twenty-four hours to adjust to its new surroundings before you try handling it. When you start handling your new pet, it may help to stand the cage in a cardboard box and take the top of the cage completely off. That way, the animal is contained and yet is easy to reach.

Young hamsters, like puppies or kittens, tend to be rather "fidgety". This is simply due to their age and they soon grow out of it. For safety, handle them over a table or on the floor; they haven't got far to fall if they do leap around!

Begin taming by talking softly to the animal and offering titbits. Hamsters cannot see very well, so this will help your pet to learn your scent and voice. Move on to gentle stroking, so that the hamster learns to accept your touch.

Once the hamster is happy about being stroked, try picking it up. To do this, either scoop it up in two cupped hands or hold it firmly around the body with one hand, whichever you find easier. If it struggles, replace it in the cage to calm down before repeating the exercise. Eventually you will be able to handle your hamster as much as you like!

Roborovski's hamsters are very, very fast and require a lot of handling before they will calm down to any significant degree. For this reason they are not generally recommended as pets for children; this species is more a pet to watch than to cuddle.

Health Issues

Hamsters are normally healthy little beasts, living to about two years with little problem. Things to watch out for include lumps anywhere on the body, wheezing, coughing or sneezing, loss of appetite or diarrhoea. If you see any of these symptoms, keep an eye on it. If the symptoms persist, or you are concerned about your pet, contact your local Veterinary Surgeon, who will provide you with all the medical help and advice that you need.

Dwarf hamsters living in groups of two or more also need to be regularly checked for serious bites, (i.e., ones which have drawn blood). Although "bickering" is common amongst Dwarf hamsters, real fighting is rare – what sounds like "fighting" is usually all noise and no harm. A wound indicates that the fighting is, (or was), serious and the animals should be separated.

Useful Contacts

If you want more information about showing or keeping hamsters, you can contact the Northern or the Midland & Southern Hamster Club Secretary,

Wendy Barry, 01373 300766, (email: secretary@mashamster.club)

Lynne Blair, 01484 663252, (email: info@northernhamsterclub.co.uk)

Hamsters as pets



Your hamster is a live animal, not a toy. It needs your care every day of its life, which may last two years or more. You should, however, be rewarded with a gentle and fascinating pet.

In the wild, hamsters come out at night to collect seeds, insects and plants to eat. The hamster carries its food back to its burrow in large "cheek pouches". Syrian, (Golden), hamsters are not social animals; they live alone and will attack any other hamster that they meet. For this reason, each adult Syrian hamster must have a cage of its own. The more social "Dwarf" hamsters, (Campbell's Russians, Winter White Russians, Chinese and Roborovski's), can often be kept in groups of the same species, although even they must be watched for signs of fighting.

Wild Syrian hamsters are all shorthaired and golden coloured. Careful breeding has produced many new colours and three coat types, (longhaired, satin and rex). The normal colour of most wild Dwarf hamsters is grey-brown with a black stripe down their back, although again, careful breeding has produced a number of attractive colours. Roborovski's hamsters are sandy brown in the wild and at present there is the only one other colour (Husky - white faced) available in captivity.

At a show each animal is compared to a description of what its colour *should* look like, called a standard. The Judge gives marks according to how close to this ideal it is and the hamster with the highest mark wins. The Midland Hamster Club runs shows in the Midlands and Wales. If you want to know about shows in your area, please contact the Secretary of the Club in your area.

Housing

Almost any pet shop will stock a wide variety of hamster cages. These range from wire ones with plastic bases to huge plastic ones with lots of tunnels and rooms. Choose whichever one you like best, but make sure that there is easy access to all areas, both for cleaning and so that you can easily handle your hamster. Dwarf hamsters must be kept in either a tank or a **mouse** cage, as they may be able to squeeze through bars designed for Syrian hamsters.

To prepare the cage, cover the base with a ½" layer of sawdust or wood shavings and supply a handful of shredded tissues in one corner for the hamster to make its nest with. Fix a water bottle to the cage with the spout at a height your pet can reach when sitting up on its hind paws. Food can be supplied in a dish or simply placed on the floor of the cage, whichever you prefer.

Cage Equipment

Many cages have an exercise wheel, which most hamsters enjoy. Solid wheels are best, as the hamster's feet cannot slip between the slats. Other very popular "toys" are toilet roll tubes and cardboard boxes. These will be examined, explored and finally, chewed to shreds! Large dog biscuits can also be given, to provide something for the hamster to gnaw on. This will help to keep the teeth healthy.

Cleaning

Hamster cages should be cleaned about once every week or ten days. Start by placing your hamster in a **secure** box, empty bucket or other escape-proof container. Dismantle the cage and throw out the old sawdust, bedding and food. Wash any plastic parts of the cage in warm, soapy water, rinse them well and dry them thoroughly. Supply fresh shavings, bedding and food and then replace the hamster.

Feeding

Hamsters will eat almost anything; mostly nuts and seeds, but they also enjoy fresh fruit and vegetables and even a little meat or cheese.

The basis for your hamster's daily feed should be a balanced "hamster mix" from the pet shop (such as Supreme Petfood's Harry Hamster). Your pet will eat about an egg-cupful of this a day; any extra will simply be stashed away in the food-store.

Nearly all hamsters enjoy fresh "greens" such as carrot, cucumber, lettuce, sweet apple, cauliflower (including the leaves), pear and so on. The only fruit or vegetables definitely to be avoided are acidic ones, such as citrus fruits and onions. Hamsters do not require large quantities, so the simplest way to provide your hamster's green food is by setting aside a small slice of whichever fruit or vegetable is being prepared for the human family.

In addition, young, growing animals, (up to about three months old), will enjoy a little milky cereal, (for example, porridge or Weetabix), each evening. A plastic coffee jar lid makes an ideal dish to serve this in.

Weekly "treats" may include one or two raisins or sultanas, small scraps of **cooked** meat or chicken, bits of cheese or hard-boiled egg, or a few mealworms. Like humans, however, hamsters are individuals, with their own peculiar likes and dislikes. It is up to you to discover what your particular hamster likes. However, **never, ever** give anything that is sticky, (like toffee), or that might melt, (like chocolate). If this sort of food is carried in the cheek pouches it will become stuck. An infection will then set up which may prove fatal.

Whatever you feed to your hamster will, (if the hamster can carry it), be stored. It is therefore **vital** that, if you choose to give foods such as meat or cheese, you only give **tiny** amounts that will be eaten quickly. In addition, check the hamster's food-store regularly to make sure that nothing is going bad.

Breeding

Syrian hamsters may have twelve or more babies at once. Dwarf hamsters living together may produce babies every eighteen days, with up to ten in each litter. **Please** do not even consider breeding from your pet unless you can guarantee good homes for this number of youngsters!

Syrian hamsters must only be allowed together to mate; they must **never** be left together. Also, the male must **never** be put in the **female's** cage or she will attack him. Female hamsters are **in season**, (ready to mate), every fourth evening. To find out when your female is in season, put the hamsters together in an empty box. When they meet they will sniff each other. If the female is not in season she will rear up and fend off the male; she may also chase him, if he runs away. A fight will develop, so they should be separated quickly. If she **is** in season, she will run a few steps away from the male, who will chase **her**. She will then freeze, and he will mate with her.

Once mating has begun, leave them together for about twenty minutes to half an hour, during which they will mate many times. At the end of this time the pair should be returned to their separate cages. Dwarf hamsters, being more sociable, can be introduced as babies of six to eight weeks and live together all the time, as the males are generally good fathers. Introducing adult Dwarf hamsters is not advisable; they will often fight, although most males will accept a female who is under six or seven weeks old.

The pregnant female should have milky cereal as well as her normal food and should be handled as little as possible. Syrian babies will arrive sixteen days after mating, but small Dwarf litters may arrive without much warning; the female does not always look pregnant. Two or three days before the babies are expected to arrive the cage should be cleaned thoroughly, as it cannot be cleaned again until they are running around at about two and a half weeks old.

When the litter arrives, continue to feed the female with as much hamster mix as she wants and keep giving milky cereal. **Do not touch** either the nest or the babies, in case their mother rejects them. The babies are blind, deaf and naked but grow quickly. From about a week of age you can open the top of the nest with a spoon and drop in hamster mix and finely chopped greens for the young. (Rub the spoon in the sawdust first to disguise the smell).

The youngsters' eyes open at about two weeks old and they start to explore the cage. They can be taken from the mother at three weeks of age and, by four weeks old, should be split into "male only" and "female only" cages, in case they breed amongst themselves. (Dwarf babies can be taken from their mother as early as two and a half weeks if another litter is expected). They can go to their new homes from about five weeks of age.