

Gerbil - Facts & Care Sheet

Gerbils, or the Mongolian Gerbil, were first discovered in 1866 by a French biologist. Gerbils were later introduced to the UK as laboratory animals. They soon established themselves as desirable pets however and there are now over a dozen different species of gerbil all residing within a subgroup of the rodent family.

Gerbils are desert animals are natural burrowers and are happiest tunneling underground. Their inquisitive nature makes them popular pets. Gerbils will shred items to make nesting material and will nibble constantly on all kinds of surfaces. These are daytime animals who enjoy human companionship and in return will provide hours of entertainment and enjoyment.

Sociable animals, Gerbils will be happier in groups or pairs. Gerbils should never be kept with other small animals. If you want to keep more than one, you should buy them together from the same cage as if you try to introduce a single gerbil to an established breeding pair or colony they are very likely to fight.

Your new gerbil will need a couple of days to settle down before you begin to handle him. Talk to him and put your hand in the cage to allow him to smell it. When you do handle him, make sure he is awake, then pick him up slowly by cupping both hands around him gently but firmly. He may escape from your hands so do not hold him high in the air in case he falls. It is best to handle him close to the floor or a table top. Never pick him up by his tail as the skin may strip off. Occasionally a gerbil will have a fit when handled. If this occurs, place him back in his cage to recover. Gerbils will enjoy being handled once they are tame and should eventually come to you to take food from your hand.

Will I make a good pet?

Gerbils are easy to care for and with lots of attention will become tame and make good family pets. Built to withstand desert conditions, they produce little waste, naturally conserving as much water and nutrition as possible. This makes them a popular, clean and odourless pet. They're curious, active and entertaining and are ideal pets for older children. Gerbils live for two to four years.

Sociable creatures?

Gerbils are used to living in colonies and are therefore very sociable. Solitary gerbils may become depressed causing behavioural problems and in some cases, poor health. They should be kept in single-sex pairs or in groups. Buy your gerbils at the same time – they will probably be happier as they'll be used to living together from a young age. New gerbils over 10 weeks old are highly likely to fight when introduced to one another.

The right home for me?

Most hamster cages are not best suited to gerbils. Position the cage away from radiators and draughts. Cages wholly constructed of plastic or glass with ventilation areas are ideal as you can provide a deep layer of woodshavings for your gerbils to tunnel in. Gerbilariums are recommended by the rescue centre, you can recreate the natural burrows they'd have in the wild and set these up to imitate their natural environment, these can be purchased from the small animal section of your chosen pet shop or alternatively if you want something bigger, you might like to use a fish tank and adapt the lid. Fill the tank section with bedding material - your gerbils will soon create a series of tunnels that you'll be able to see through the glass. Lots of toys and tubes should always be provided for your pets to play with and chew on to keep them entertained. If you put a wheel in their cage make sure it's suitable for gerbils as they can catch their tails in wheels with open bars. Gerbils are enthusiastic chewers so if you want to keep your gerbils in a modular unit, make sure you use anti-gnaw rings in the tunnels.

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What do I eat?

Your pets will require a good quality gerbil mix. You can supplement your pets' diet with very small quantities of fresh fruit and vegetables such as apple and carrot. Do not feed them too much fresh food as this can lead to stomach upsets. Vitamin supplements and mineral stones can be added to your pets' diet to keep them in optimum health. Gerbils can develop stomach upsets and diarrhoea if their diet contains too much carbohydrate or fat and not enough roughage. Pumpkin seeds make great gerbil treats. Sunflower seeds are tasty too, but they're very fattening and too many can cause stomach upsets and obesity.

Playtime

Your gerbils' lives can be enriched by providing toys and stimulating natural behaviour. For example, hiding treats around their cage keeps them amused and imitates natural feeding. Hideaway holes like houses and tubes allow them to hide their food just as they would in the wild. Gerbils love to chew so wooden blocks or toys are always welcome! Keeping gerbils in pairs brings them happiness and companionship.

Keeping me clean

Gerbils are extremely clean so their home requires less cleaning than that of other small pets. Your gerbils' cage should be cleaned thoroughly once a week using a pet-safe disinfectant. If you keep your pets in a gerbilarium, clean it thoroughly every two or three weeks with a pet-safe disinfectant and change the peat or soil. But if they're using one area of their home as a toilet it will need to be cleaned more often.

Keeping me fit and healthy

A healthy diet and hygienic conditions will help to keep your gerbils in good health but there are a number of potential problems that you should be aware of. A healthy gerbil will be active, playful and inquisitive with soft, shiny fur, bright eyes and a clean nose. Signs of illness include lethargy, ruffled fur, mucus around the eyes or nose and loss of appetite. A gerbil's teeth should not be visible when its mouth is closed and there should be a fine covering of fur over its ears. As with all rodents, gerbils' teeth grow constantly so it's important to provide them with wooden toys, mineral stones or treats to gnaw on. Gerbils can develop sores around the nose or mouth from burrowing in rough cage material or rubbing against cage bars if they're bored. If this happens, try changing the cage material and provide toys and exercise equipment such as chew toys and tunnels. If your pet shows signs of being unwell contact your vet immediately.



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Top tips for a healthy

Dental

Gnawing toys are an essential part of your pets' dental routine and should always be available as they help to prevent overgrown teeth.

Vitamins and supplements

Vitamins can be added to your pets' food or water. Probiotic supplements can help to maintain healthy digestion and relieve stress. Getting used to their new surroundings can be stressful for your gerbils so consider buying probiotic supplements when you take them home.

Grooming

Gerbils need to groom regularly to keep their coats clean and healthy. Providing a small amount of chinchilla sand in a dish will encourage your pets to groom themselves.

Cleaning and hygiene

Clean out your gerbils' cage once a week using a pet-safe disinfectant or every two or three weeks if you keep your pets in a gerbilarium.