

# Caring for Your Hamster

By Mark Burgess, DVM

There are two types of hamsters commonly sold as pets. Most are golden hamsters, also known as Syrian hamsters. These have many hair colors and may be short- or long-haired. Siberian dwarf hamsters are smaller, with short, greyish-brown hair on top and white hair below. Hamsters may be friendly pets when handled regularly, but some individuals fail to tame well and are prone to biting, especially when first awakened. Golden hamsters tend to be less aggressive than Siberian dwarf hamsters and therefore are probably better pets. With good care, a hamster may live two to five years.



If you're thinking about getting a hamster, please adopt one from a rescue group rather than buying from a pet store or breeder. There are many wonderful hamsters out there just waiting to be adopted. To find a hamster rescue, do a search for "hamster rescue" on the Internet. Or, check out the "small and furry" category on [www.petfinder.com](http://www.petfinder.com).

## Housing

Golden hamsters are native to hot, arid regions, so they do not tolerate cool temperatures. They should be kept above 70 degrees Fahrenheit, since they may become unconscious at temperatures below 65 degrees. Siberian hamsters tolerate cool temperatures well, but they are usually kept at normal room temperature (70 to 72 degrees).

Hamsters may be housed in wood or wire cages with solid floors. Avoid wire floors, since feet may become caught and bones broken as the pet tries to free himself. Wire floors also tend to cause sores on the feet. Provide a thick layer of good bedding, such as recycled paper, straw, or hardwood shavings (not cedar or pine). Hamsters, especially the males, are often aggressive if housed together, so they may need to be kept separate to prevent fighting.

Hamsters are active when awake, and like to run on a wheel (use a solid, rimmed wheel to prevent foot trauma), but they do not need large amounts of space. Enclosures with tunnel systems provide some entertainment for the hamster, but they must be kept clean and ventilated. Daily exercise outside the cage is ideal but please supervise. A cage measuring 18 x 24 inches can be adequate for a single hamster, especially if it has multiple levels.

## Feeding

The bulk of the hamster's diet should be hamster pellets (not a seed and fruit mix) and grass hay, such as timothy. Pellets provide balanced nutrition; hay provides roughage for intestinal health. You can feed the pellets free-choice, unless obesity occurs; hay is always fed free-choice. You can offer your hamster fresh, leafy green veggies daily, but

limit it to less than 20 percent of the diet. Items high in sugars (such as fruit, baby carrots, tomatoes, and corn) or high in protein (such as seeds, oats, and alfalfa) should be especially limited, since they easily upset the bowel.

Fresh water, of course, should always be available. Ball-bearing bottles are cleaner and not as easily spilled as bowls. Remember to clean your hamster's cage, food bowls and water sources regularly.

## Common Diseases

**Dental diseases.** Since hamsters have constantly growing front teeth (incisors), they occasionally develop overgrown front teeth for a variety of reasons. Incisor overgrowth may be visible as long, crooked, tusk-like projections from the mouth. Chewing on hard objects such as wood or metal may twist and damage the teeth, and increase the risk of overgrowth. Offer your hamster soft chew toys, such as ink-free cardboard, instead of wood to chew on; this may minimize damage to the incisors.

Treatment of tooth problems often involves trimming the overgrown teeth back to normal length and/or extracting any infected teeth. If the incisors overgrow severely, the hamster may be unable to eat. Fasting hamsters need immediate care because they can die from bowel upsets with inadequate roughage intake.

**“Wet tail” (bowel upsets).** Intestinal upsets are a major cause of death in pet hamsters. Symptoms may include loss of appetite, diarrhea, and lethargy, but some pets show only one of these signs. Hamsters have sensitive intestines, and almost any stress can cause this disease. Sudden diet changes, sugary treats, parasites, and some antibiotics (especially penicillins) can cause sudden and often fatal diarrhea or bloat.

Bowel disease is unpredictable. A hamster with a mild case may have slightly soft stool for days and survive, but a hamster with a severe case may develop depression and shock within hours and die before diarrhea develops. Prevention is via feeding a high-roughage diet with minimal use of sweet items such as fruit; you should also minimize high-protein foods (oats, seeds, nuts, and alfalfa). Avoid sudden diet changes, restrict veggies to less than 20 percent of the diet, and avoid veggies in the cabbage family.

Treatment of bowel upset varies with the severity, but may include bacterial supplements such as milk-free acidophilus, increased roughage (force-feeding, if necessary), intestinal stimulants such as Reglan or Propulsid, anti-diarrheals such as Kaopectate or blackberry leaves, and injectable fluids, in severe cases. Prompt medical care is essential whenever a hamster is lethargic, is not eating, has diarrhea, or feels cold to the touch. Sick hamsters may die within hours, but many cases of bowel upset are curable if caught in time.

**Mites.** These common skin parasites often produce no symptoms unless the hamster is weakened from other disease. The microscopic mites burrow deep into the skin; when numerous, they cause intense itching, flaking, and hair loss. A hamster with a severe case may develop large scabs or sores because of intense scratching and biting at the skin.

Mites are hard to kill, but they do respond to treatment with ivermectin (oral or injectable), given daily for 6-8 weeks. Lyme sulfur dip may help when applied twice weekly for 6-8 weeks, but it's more labor-intensive and must be applied thoroughly. Cleaning the cage weekly when treating the mites may help reduce re-infestation, but long-term environmental treatment is unnecessary, since the parasites die if they are off their host for long. These parasites are species-specific but highly contagious between hamsters; use caution when introducing new hamsters to an existing group.

**Respiratory infection.** Signs include sneezing, wheezing, lethargy, nasal or eye discharge, or difficulty breathing. Various bacteria may cause these infections. Treatment involves using antibiotics with caution, since hamsters may develop severe bowel upsets during treatment. To minimize the risk of respiratory disease, provide a warm, clean cage; avoid the use of wood-chip beddings; and feed your hamster a balanced diet.

**Head tilt (wry neck, torticollis).** This condition is usually due to internal ear infection, sometimes secondary to a respiratory infection. The hamster often tilts her head to one side and loses her balance, falling or circling when she tries to walk. Bacteria are the usual cause and treatment is with antibiotics.

**Hypothermia.** Golden hamsters are very sensitive to cold and may become unconscious at temperatures in the mid-60s or lower. Their breathing is very shallow and they often appear dead, but may slowly revive when warmed in one's hand. Avoid air temperatures below 70 degrees in the room where your hamster lives, and keep the cage away from cool areas, such as windows. Provide warm bedding, such as recycled paper or tissue paper, for your pet to nest in; a small nest box also helps conserve body heat when the hamster is sleeping.

**Fight wounds.** Hamsters tend to be aggressive and antisocial with each other; they often fight if housed together. This may result in bite wounds; their eyes are also easily popped out of the sockets during fighting. Any visible wounds on a hamster require immediate medical treatment; the risk of infection is great, and treatment of abscesses in hamsters is difficult. Early antibiotic therapy to prevent infection is the safer option.

## Veterinary Care

No vaccines are given to hamsters, but regular exams are recommended for early disease detection. Have an exam done when you get your hamster, then bring him or her in for an annual checkup; ideally, pets over two years old should be examined every six months. With good care, your hamster can be a happy and lovable pet!

*Dr. Mark Burgess is owner of Southwest Animal Hospital/The Exotic Animal Practice in Beaverton, Oregon. Ninety-five percent of his practice is small exotic pets, including ferrets, rabbits, rodents, reptiles, hedgehogs, marsupials, and some wildlife. He lectures at conferences and has published articles on exotic pet disease in medical journals.*