



## Hamster Care Sheet

### Basic facts:

The common hamster species encountered in South Africa are the Syrian hamster (larger in size) and various hybrid Dwarf hamsters. Syrian hamsters are often sold by pet shops under fancier names if they display a sought-after coat color, length or texture.

The average life span is 2 years.

**DO NOT house more than one hamster in an enclosure!** Syrian hamsters are known to be solitary, even in the wild. Contrary to the information available from other countries on various purebred dwarf hamsters, the hybrids available in South Africa cannot be kept together as they will usually fight (mainly at night). This will result in them living under extreme stress.

Hamsters are not good pets for young kids as they are very quick, can bite painfully if stressed, and are easily harmed. Aside from that they are nocturnal and will often hide away during the day, when a child would want to interact with them.

**Torpor:** hamsters may respond to a drop in ambient temperature or shortening of daylight hours with a hibernation-like state. This is a physiologic state of reduced metabolic and mental activity. This can cause owners to think their hamster is deceased. In captivity it is crucial to bring your hamster out of this state as soon as possible as it can be life-threatening.

### Enclosure:

You may need to forget everything you thought you knew. The **typical plastic hamster cage found in pet shops is NOT ideal** for these tiny rodents as they are more likely to incur health conditions and less likely to be able to follow their natural instincts. Pet shops are making very good money selling you the wrong product! If you purchase a purpose-built enclosure the value-for-money will be much higher and you will be doing good by your pet.

Hamsters are best kept in habitats with solid floors, glass walls, and a full-mesh top for adequate ventilation. These can either be purpose-built or can be created out of a large fish tank or terrarium. Visit <https://www.hamsterssouthafrica.com/housing-habitats-cages> for further tips and DIY options.

**Minimum unbroken floor space (length x depth) should equate to no less than 5000cm<sup>2</sup>** (e.g. 100cmx50cm)! Even larger enclosures are recommended where space permits.

**Hamster wheels** are important for exercise, but it is important that they are **big enough and safe**. Dwarf hamsters require a wheel of 21-30cm in diameter, Syrian hamsters are better off with a diameter of 27-



35cm. The wheel should be free-standing and the running surface should be solid. Avoid wheels made of mesh as these can cause bumblefoot, and entrapment of limbs and fur. **Never use a hamster ball!**

Provide a **nesting box** with soft bedding material (e.g. shredded 1-ply toilet paper) as a separate space for your hamster to hide away for undisturbed rest. Avoid plastic houses as well as cotton wool, fluffy nesting material, wood shavings and fabric.

**Burrowing:** hamsters have a natural instinct to want to burrow and for the hamster owner it is fantastic to watch how much joy this activity gives their pet! It is therefore crucial to provide your hamster with an area where they can fulfill this need. At least 1/3 of your enclosure should be filled with burrowing material of 30cm depth. The ideal material for burrowing is a paper or cellulose-based product (e.g. from Keri's Custom Cabins, Hyggelig, Oxbow Pure Comfort and shredded 1-ply toilet paper).

**Sand potty:** you can train most hamsters to pee in a designated potty. This reduces the amount of cleaning needed.

**DO NOT USE wood shavings, sawdust, hay, cat litter, scented materials, corncob or printed newspaper as a substrate anywhere in the enclosure.** These can lead to serious health conditions, even when marketed for hamsters.

Enrichment/entertainment items (e.g. cardboard tubes, wooden chews, destructible toys) and hide-outs made of wood, cardboard or grass hay (e.g. Oxbow Timothy Tunnel) are beneficial for your pet's well-being.

#### Nutrition:

Hamsters are omnivores and need a balanced and complete diet. This is made up of dry and fresh food components.

**Dry food:** A high-quality dry food mix with balanced nutrition is essential for your hamsters health. There are good quality pelleted foods available (e.g. Oxbow, Burgess, Mazuri), however pellets do not allow for foraging behaviour and many hamsters will not accept them as an exclusive diet. There are good-quality feed mixes that can be offered in addition to pellets (Keri's Custom Cabins Commercial Mix, Hyggelig, Oliver's Burrow Hamster Mix). It is advisable to offer variety within your dry foods by mixing 2-3 different, high-quality foods. **AVOID common hamster feed mixes found in the pet shops** – they contain large quantities of sunflower seeds, peanuts, corn and nutritionally deficient pellets. These do not provide a balanced diet for your hamster – these high sugar based foods often lead to onset of diabetes or malnutrition.

**Fresh foods:** This includes fresh veggies (butternut, fennel leaves, courgettes, etc.), sprouts, protein source (fish, mealworms, beef), and occasional small amounts of fruit.

Whimzees are a safe treat that assists with dental health.



If your hamster is hoarding their food excessively then you are likely overfeeding! Make sure you clean out the hamster's hoarding stash once a week.

Water bottles are best attached in a stand. Also provide a sturdy ceramic or glass bowl with straight sides on a platform as an additional water source. Food should be offered in a ceramic, glass or metal bowl.

#### Health:

**Diarrhea** ("wet tail") can be caused by bacterial pathogens and can be life-threatening. Poor hygiene in the enclosure, poor food quality and sudden diet changes can also precipitate loose stools.

Top and bottom incisors are meant to be worn down during chewing activities. It is advisable to offer your hamster safe items to chew on (e.g. Whimzees, wooden chews, etc.). Genetic deformities can be the cause of overgrowth of these teeth. Unfortunately, the behavioural issue of cage biting can also predispose to malocclusion and in turn **overgrown incisors**. Cage biting is mostly encountered with hamsters that live in inadequate cages with little to no enrichment and a poor diet.

Hamsters have large **cheek pouches** on either side where they can store food. On occasion hamsters may struggle to empty them which results in **impaction**. Signs to look out for are discomfort, redness in the cheek region and hard swellings that don't resolve. The cheek pouches can also turn inside-out (**everted**) at which point you may find your hamster with a long fleshy bit hanging out of their mouth. Both situations call for a visit to a hamster-savvy vet.

Hamsters can develop **bumblefoot** from rough or wire surfaces.

**Skin irritation** can be seen with parasites, poor hygiene and the wrong type of bedding.

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Information on this care sheet is the opinion of the creator. This care sheet will be adapted if updated information becomes available.

To order food, bedding, enclosure fittings and enrichment items you can contact Exotic Pets Overberg via whatsapp (071-142-2953) or email [admin@exoticpetsoverberg.co.za](mailto:admin@exoticpetsoverberg.co.za). Or visit our online shop at [www.exoticpetsoverberg.co.za](http://www.exoticpetsoverberg.co.za)

If you are looking to learn more then please visit the official homepage of Hamsters South Africa: <https://www.hamsterssouthafrica.com/>.