

Hamster Care Sheet

Most of what pet shops sell for hamsters is wrong. Here is what they actually need.

Living With Hamsters | The Enclosure | Nutrition | Health | Call Your Vet

At A Glance

LIFESPAN
About 2 years

COMPANY
Always alone, never share

FLOOR SPACE
5000cm² unbroken minimum

BURROWING
30cm deep over a third

WHEEL
21 to 30cm dwarf, 27 to 35cm Syrian

ACTIVE
Nocturnal

Living With Hamsters

- The species you will meet in South Africa are the **Syrian** hamster, the larger of the two, and various hybrid **Dwarf** hamsters. Pet shops often sell Syrians under fancier names when they have a sought-after coat.
- The average lifespan is 2 years.
- **Never house more than one hamster together.** Syrians are solitary even in the wild. Whatever you read from other countries about purebred dwarfs, the hybrids sold here cannot be kept together. They will fight, usually at night, and live under extreme stress.
- Hamsters are **not good pets for young children**. They are quick, they bite painfully when stressed, and they are easily hurt. They are also nocturnal, so they hide away during the day, which is exactly when a child wants to play.
- **Torpor.** A drop in temperature or shortening daylight can put a hamster into a hibernation-like state of reduced activity. Owners often think their hamster has died. In captivity it is crucial to bring them out of it as fast as possible, because it can be life-threatening.

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The Enclosure

- You may need to forget everything you thought you knew. The typical plastic hamster cage sold in pet shops is **not suitable**. It makes health problems more likely and natural behaviour less likely. Pet shops make very good money selling you the wrong product. A purpose-built enclosure is better value and better for your pet.
- Hamsters do best with **solid floors, glass walls and a full mesh top** for ventilation. Buy purpose-built, or build one from a large fish tank or terrarium.
- Minimum unbroken floor space is **5000cm²**, so 100cm x 50cm. Go bigger where you have the room.
- **Wheels matter.** Dwarf hamsters need 21 to 30cm diameter, Syrians 27 to 35cm. Free-standing, with a solid running surface. Mesh wheels cause bumblefoot and trap limbs and fur. **Never use a hamster ball.**
- Provide a nesting box with soft bedding such as shredded one-ply toilet paper, as a separate place to rest undisturbed. Avoid plastic houses, cotton wool, fluffy nesting material, wood shavings and fabric.
- **Burrowing** is an instinct, and watching a hamster do it is one of the joys of keeping one. At least a third of the enclosure should hold burrowing material **30cm deep**. Paper or cellulose based is ideal: Keri's Custom Cabins, Hyggelig, Oxbow Pure Comfort, or shredded one-ply toilet paper.
- A **sand potty** can be trained in most hamsters and cuts down the cleaning.
- **Never use** wood shavings, sawdust, hay, cat litter, scented materials, corncob or printed newspaper anywhere in the enclosure. They cause serious health problems even when the packaging says hamster.
- Enrichment such as cardboard tubes, wooden chews and destructible toys, plus hides of wood, cardboard or grass hay like the Oxbow Timothy Tunnel.

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Nutrition

- Hamsters are omnivores and need a balanced diet of dry and fresh components.
- **Dry food.** A high-quality mix is essential. Pelleted foods exist (Oxbow, Burgess, Mazuri) but pellets give no foraging behaviour and many hamsters will not eat them exclusively. Good feed mixes can go alongside: Keri's Custom Cabins Commercial Mix, Hyggelig, Oliver's Burrow Hamster Mix. Mix 2 or 3 high-quality foods for variety.
- **Avoid the common pet shop hamster mixes.** They are heavy on sunflower seeds, peanuts, corn and poor pellets. These high-sugar foods often lead to diabetes or malnutrition.
- **Fresh food.** Vegetables such as butternut, fennel leaves and courgettes, sprouts, a protein source such as fish, mealworms or beef, and occasional small amounts of fruit. Whimzees are a safe treat that helps dental health.
- If your hamster is hoarding excessively you are probably overfeeding. Clear out the stash once a week.
- Attach water bottles in a stand, and add a sturdy ceramic or glass bowl with straight sides on a platform as a second water source. Food goes in ceramic, glass or metal.

Health

- **Teeth.** Top and bottom incisors are worn down by chewing, so offer safe things to chew such as Whimzees and wooden chews. Overgrowth can be genetic, but cage biting causes it too, and cage biting comes from inadequate cages, no enrichment and a poor diet.
- **Cheek pouches.** Hamsters store food in pouches on either side and sometimes struggle to empty them, which causes impaction. Watch for discomfort, redness around the cheek and hard swellings that do not resolve. Pouches can also turn inside out, leaving a long fleshy piece hanging from the mouth.
- **Bumblefoot** develops on rough or wire surfaces.
- **Skin irritation** points to parasites, poor hygiene or the wrong bedding.

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- **Diarrhoea, known as wet tail.** It can be bacterial and it can be life-threatening. Poor enclosure hygiene, poor food quality and sudden diet changes all bring on loose stools.
- An impacted or everted cheek pouch.
- Overgrown incisors.
- Sores on the feet, or skin irritation that does not settle.

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