

# Hamster

## Care Guide for New Owners

Hamster

Exotic Pet

Solitary Animal

Nocturnal

### Quick Facts at a Glance

<b>Common Species</b>	Syrian (golden), Roborovski, Campbell's, Winter White, Chinese
<b>Lifespan</b>	Syrian: 2 to 3 years; dwarf species: 1.5 to 3 years
<b>Adult Size</b>	Syrian: 5 to 7 inches; dwarf species: 2 to 4 inches
<b>Activity Cycle</b>	Nocturnal to crepuscular; most active at night
<b>Temperament</b>	Varies by species; Syrians are typically more handleable than dwarfs
<b>Housing</b>	Minimum 450 sq inches of unbroken floor space; bigger is always better
<b>Social Needs</b>	Syrians are strictly solitary; most dwarf species can be kept in same-sex pairs
<b>Diet</b>	Omnivore; seeds, grains, protein, and fresh vegetables
<b>Wheel</b>	Solid surface wheel required; minimum 8 inches for dwarfs, 11+ for Syrians
<b>Burrowing</b>	Deep substrate of at least 6 inches required; 10 to 12 inches is ideal
<b>Good with Kids?</b>	Older children with supervision; not ideal for very young children

### Meet the Hamster

Hamsters are often marketed as low-maintenance starter pets, but the truth is more nuanced than that. A hamster in the right setup, with enough space, enough substrate to burrow, and the right wheel, is an absolute delight to observe and interact with. A hamster in a small wire cage with a tiny plastic wheel is an anxious, stressed animal who is not thriving.

The single most important shift in hamster care over the last decade has been the move toward much larger enclosures and much deeper substrate. Research into wild hamster behavior has completely changed what the hamster community considers appropriate housing. This guide reflects current best-practice standards, which differ significantly from what is still sold in most pet stores.

### **Syrian vs. Dwarf Hamsters**

Syrian hamsters are the largest common pet hamster species and are generally easier to handle and tame. They are strictly solitary and must always live alone. Dwarf species (Roborovski, Campbell's, Winter White, and Chinese) are smaller, faster, and often more skittish. Some dwarf species can be kept in same-sex pairs if introduced at a young age, but same-sex aggression is common and pairs should always be monitored closely.

### **Where They Come From**

The most common pet hamster, the Syrian or golden hamster (*Mesocricetus auratus*), originates from the arid regions of Syria and Turkey. Wild Syrian hamsters live solitary lives in deep burrow systems in dry grasslands and semi-desert areas. They are highly territorial and defend their burrows aggressively against other hamsters, which explains why they must be housed alone in captivity.

All pet Syrian hamsters descend from a single female and her litter captured in Syria in 1930. Domestic Syrian hamsters have been bred in captivity for fewer than 100 years, which means they retain many of their wild instincts, including the need to burrow deeply, run many miles per night, and hoard food. Dwarf species originate from the steppes and semi-arid regions of central Asia and Russia, where they live in similarly demanding environments.

### **Wild Hamsters Run Up to 9 Miles per Night**

Research tracking wild hamsters has found they can travel 5 to 9 miles in a single night. This is why a wheel is not optional and why wheel size matters so much. A small hamster running on an inadequately sized wheel curves its spine with every stride, which causes chronic pain and injury over time.

## Housing and Habitat

Housing is the area where hamster care has changed the most dramatically in recent years, and it is the area where pet store advice and products are most consistently inadequate. A hamster in a proper enclosure is a completely different animal from a hamster in a small wire cage.

### Floor Space Requirements

The minimum floor space is 450 square inches of unbroken floor space for a Syrian hamster. That is roughly 30 inches by 15 inches. Many hamster welfare organizations now recommend 600 to 800 square inches or more as a true minimum, and larger is always better. For dwarf species, 450 square inches is still the minimum, though they appreciate as much space as you can provide.

#### Why Bigger Matters

Studies on hamster welfare have found that hamsters housed in smaller enclosures show significantly higher rates of stereotypic behaviors, which are repetitive, purposeless behaviors like bar-chewing, repeated digging in corners, and excessive self-grooming. These are signs of chronic stress and frustration. Hamsters in appropriately large enclosures with deep substrate show dramatically fewer of these behaviors.

### Recommended Enclosure Types

#### Large Bin Cages

A 110-quart or larger smooth-sided storage bin with ventilation holes or mesh cut into the lid is one of the most cost-effective and popular options. Bin cages provide a large, smooth-walled space with no bars to climb, which is important because a hamster that falls from a height in a wire cage can be seriously injured. The smooth sides prevent climbing and escaping. Cut ventilation carefully and cover with hardware cloth secured firmly on the inside.

#### Large Glass or Acrylic Terrariums

A 40-gallon or larger aquarium or hamster-specific terrarium works very well. Glass provides excellent visibility and holds substrate well. Ensure the lid is secure and provides good ventilation. Terrariums retain humidity better than wire cages, which is beneficial for substrate depth but means monitoring humidity to ensure it stays appropriate.

#### Wire Cages: With Caveats

If using a wire cage, it must be very large, have bar spacing of no more than half an inch for Syrians and quarter inch for dwarfs, and have a solid bottom. The Savic Hamster Heaven and similar large wire cages are sometimes used, but they rarely provide enough depth for adequate substrate. Solid-sided enclosures are generally preferred for this reason.

### What to Avoid

Small wire cages marketed as hamster homes in pet stores: Almost all are far too small and have inadequate substrate depth.

Cages with wire floors: Cause foot injuries and chronic discomfort.

Multi-story cages with steep ramps: Hamsters have poor depth perception and fall easily. Any vertical elements must be very gentle and safe.

Exercise balls: Stressful, disorienting, prevent the hamster from stopping to rest, and provide no ventilation. Never use an exercise ball.

Tanks under 40 gallons: Too small to meet minimum floor space requirements with appropriate substrate depth.

## **Substrate Depth: The Most Important Setup Detail**

Hamsters are burrowing animals. In the wild, they dig burrow systems that can be several feet deep. In captivity, providing deep substrate is one of the most impactful things you can do for hamster welfare. The absolute minimum is 6 inches of substrate. Ten to 12 inches is strongly preferred, and many dedicated hamster owners provide even more.

Deep substrate allows your hamster to dig tunnels, build a nest chamber, and express completely natural burrowing behaviors. A hamster with adequate substrate to burrow in is a calmer, more content, and more active animal. Substrate should be packed down slightly after adding to the enclosure to help tunnels hold their shape.

## Bedding and Substrate

The substrate you choose needs to be safe, dust-free, and deep enough for burrowing. Hamsters spend a significant amount of time in close contact with their substrate, so respiratory safety is a priority.

### Recommended Substrate

Unscented paper-based bedding such as Carefresh, Small Pet Select Paper Bedding, or similar products are popular and safe options that hold tunnel shape reasonably well. Kiln-dried aspen shavings are also a good choice and burrow well. Many hamster owners use a mixture of paper bedding and aspen to get the best combination of burrowing stability and absorbency. Freeze all new bedding for 48 hours before use to eliminate potential mites.

Coconut fiber substrate, also called coco coir, is excellent for burrowing and holds tunnel shapes very well. It can be mixed with paper bedding or aspen to add stability to burrows. Organic topsoil without added fertilizer or perlite can also be mixed in as a base layer for the same reason.

### Substrate to Avoid

Cedar shavings: Toxic aromatic oils cause liver and respiratory damage.

Raw pine shavings: Contains harmful phenols.

Scented beddings of any kind: Cause respiratory irritation.

Fluffy cotton or wool bedding: A serious danger. Hamsters pack their cheek pouches with it and can swallow it, causing impaction. Loose fibers also wrap around limbs causing injury. Never use fluffy bedding.

Cat litter: Too dusty, causes respiratory damage and blockage.

## The Wheel: Essential Equipment

A wheel is not optional for a hamster. It is one of the most fundamental enrichment and exercise tools in their environment, and getting it right makes a real difference in your hamster's physical and mental health.

### Size Requirements

Syrian hamsters need a wheel with a minimum diameter of 11 inches, though many keepers prefer 12 inches or larger. Dwarf hamsters need a minimum of 8 inches. A wheel that is too small forces the hamster to run with an arched back, which causes chronic spinal pain and injury over time. When your hamster runs in the wheel, their back should be flat or very slightly curved, never arched.

### Surface and Design

The running surface must be completely solid with no gaps, mesh, or bars. Open surfaces catch feet and cause injuries. Hamsters urinate while running, and a solid surface is also much easier to clean. The Niteangel wheels, Wodent Wheel, and Silent Spinner in the correct size are all popular safe choices. Avoid spoke wheels, barred wheels, or any wheel with an open running surface.

#### A Word on Wheel Noise

Hamsters run primarily at night, and a squeaky wheel at 2 AM gets old fast. Choose a wheel that is specifically marketed as quiet or silent. Most quality wheels are very quiet when set up on a solid surface. Place the enclosure in a room where nighttime running noise will not disrupt sleep.

## Diet and Nutrition

Hamsters are omnivores who eat a varied diet of seeds, grains, plant matter, and occasional animal protein in the wild. In captivity, a balanced diet that reflects this variety keeps them healthy and at a good weight.

### Seed Mixes vs. Pellets

High-quality hamster seed mixes that are nutritionally balanced are preferred by most hamster enthusiasts over pellet-only diets, because seed mixes allow hamsters to forage and make choices, which is enriching. However, not all seed mixes are equal. Choose mixes with diverse seeds, grains, dried herbs, and some protein components. Avoid mixes heavy in sunflower seeds or peanuts, which are very high in fat and lead to obesity when overconsumed. Good brands include Higgins Sunburst, Mazuri Rat and Mouse, and Harry Hamster.

Scatter feeding, placing the daily food portion across the substrate rather than in a bowl, encourages natural foraging behavior and provides mental enrichment. Hamsters naturally hoard food and will

collect and store it in a designated spot in their enclosure. This is normal.

## Fresh Foods

### Safe Fresh Foods

- Broccoli, cauliflower, cucumber, carrot (small pieces)
- Romaine or green leaf lettuce
- Cooked plain chicken or boiled egg (small amount)
- Mealworms (live or dried)
- Small pieces of apple, pear, or strawberry (seedless)

### Never Feed These

- Citrus fruit (too acidic)
- Onions, garlic, leeks (toxic)
- Chocolate or caffeine (toxic)
- Almonds (raw bitter almonds are toxic)
- Avocado (toxic)
- Rhubarb (toxic)
- Sugary or salty human snack foods
- Iceberg lettuce (causes diarrhea)

## Water

Fresh water must always be available. A sipper bottle attached to the cage is preferred over a bowl, as hamsters will fill water bowls with substrate and bedding. Change water daily and clean the bottle thoroughly every few days.

## Handling and Interaction

Hamsters are not naturally social with humans and must be tamed with patience and consistency. Syrian hamsters are generally easier to tame than dwarf species. A well-tamed hamster is genuinely enjoyable to handle. A hamster that was never properly socialized can remain nippy and difficult to handle throughout its life.

### Taming a New Hamster

Give your new hamster at least 5 to 7 days to settle in before attempting handling. Let them get used to the sounds and smells of your home without the added stress of being picked up. Start by placing your hand in the enclosure and letting them approach and sniff you on their own terms. Progress to placing a treat on your palm. Eventually, let them walk onto your hand voluntarily before attempting to lift them.

Always handle hamsters at their natural active time, which is evening and onward. Waking a hamster during deep daytime sleep causes significant stress and greatly increases the likelihood of a defensive bite. A hamster that is startled awake may bite hard before realizing what is happening.

### Safe Handling

Hold hamsters low to the ground or over a bed or your lap, since a fall from height is very dangerous for them. Never grab from above. Cup both hands together underneath the hamster, letting them walk between your palms. Keep handling sessions calm and brief at first, extending as trust builds. If a hamster is struggling to escape or vocalizing distress, return them to their enclosure.

#### Hamsters and Children

Hamsters are not ideal pets for very young children. They are fast, fragile, and bite when stressed. Children under 8 to 10 should always have direct adult supervision during hamster handling, and should sit on the floor during handling sessions to prevent drops. A hamster dropped from standing height can sustain serious or fatal injuries.

## Common Health Issues

Hamsters are generally hardy but are susceptible to several conditions, many of which can progress very quickly given their small size. Knowing what to watch for is important.

## **Wet Tail (Proliferative Ileitis)**

A serious bacterial intestinal disease most common in Syrian hamsters under 12 weeks old, though it can affect any age. Signs include severe watery diarrhea, a wet, matted tail area, lethargy, hunched posture, loss of appetite, and a strong foul odor. Wet tail progresses very rapidly and is often fatal within 48 to 72 hours without aggressive veterinary treatment. It is a genuine emergency. Get to a vet the same day symptoms appear.

## **Respiratory Infections**

Signs include sneezing, nasal discharge, labored breathing, and lethargy. Often triggered by dusty bedding, drafts, or exposure to sick humans. Hamsters can catch some human cold viruses. Requires veterinary treatment.

## **Cheek Pouch Problems**

Hamsters store food in their cheek pouches, which extend from the cheeks to the shoulders. Pouch impaction (food stuck inside), everted pouches (pouch turning inside out), and abscesses can all occur. Signs include a hamster that keeps pawing at their face, an asymmetrical or visibly enlarged pouch, or a pouch that is visibly protruding from the mouth. Requires immediate veterinary attention.

## **Dental Overgrowth**

Hamster teeth grow continuously. Without adequate chewing material and a proper diet, incisors can overgrow and prevent eating. Signs include difficulty eating, dropping food, weight loss, and visibly long or misaligned teeth. Provide safe wooden chews and ensure diet includes items that require gnawing.

## **Tumors and Cancer**

Hamsters are prone to various tumors, particularly as they age. Adrenal gland tumors, skin tumors, and internal cancers are all relatively common. Signs vary by location but often include lumps, weight loss, hair loss, and behavioral changes. Annual vet checks are worthwhile, especially for hamsters over 18 months old.

## **Diabetes**

Campbell's and Winter White dwarf hamsters have a genetic predisposition to diabetes. Signs include excessive water intake, frequent urination, weight loss despite eating well, and lethargy. Avoid sugary treats entirely with dwarf hamsters. Diet management is the primary treatment.

## **Mites and Skin Problems**

Signs include excessive scratching, hair loss, and dry or flaky skin. Mites require veterinary diagnosis and appropriate treatment. Freeze new bedding before use to prevent introduction of mites.

## **Heatstroke**

Hamsters are sensitive to heat and can develop heatstroke at temperatures above 80 degrees F. Signs include limpness, labored breathing, and unresponsiveness. This is a medical emergency. Move to a cool area immediately and contact a vet.

## **Hibernation Attempts**

In response to cold temperatures (below 50 degrees F) or reduced light, hamsters can enter a torpor-like hibernation state. Unlike true hibernators, domestic hamsters are not equipped to safely hibernate. Signs include a cold, very still hamster who is difficult to wake. Warm them slowly with your body heat and contact a vet if they do not recover quickly.

## Things Every New Hamster Owner Should Know

### **The pet store cage is almost certainly inadequate.**

Most hamster cages sold at pet stores are far below the 450 square inch minimum floor space and provide no room for the 6-plus inches of substrate your hamster needs. Research your enclosure before bringing your hamster home.

### **Deep substrate is one of the most impactful things you can provide.**

A hamster with 10 to 12 inches of substrate to burrow in is a dramatically calmer, more content animal than one living on 2 inches of bedding. Prioritize this above almost everything else.

### **Never wake a sleeping hamster.**

A hamster startled awake from deep sleep will bite reflexively before registering that it is you. Always handle hamsters during their natural active hours, which is evening and onward.

### **The wheel is not optional.**

Set up the wheel before your hamster comes home. It should be in the enclosure from day one. Choose the right size for your species and make sure the surface is fully solid.

### **Hamsters are not low-maintenance animals.**

They need fresh food and water daily, regular spot-cleaning, a large and enriched enclosure, and consistent handling to remain tame. They are wonderful animals but deserve real commitment.

### **Find an exotic vet who sees hamsters.**

Not all vets see hamsters, and the ones who do vary significantly in experience. Find one before you need one. Hamster health deteriorates very quickly and waiting to find a vet during an emergency costs precious time.

### **Never use fluffy bedding.**

Fluffy cotton and wool bedding products are still widely sold and marketed for hamsters. They are genuinely dangerous. Hamsters pack them into their pouches, swallow them, and the fibers wrap around limbs. Never use them under any circumstances.

### **Their lifespan is short.**

Hamsters live 2 to 3 years, sometimes less. You are signing up for a short but meaningful relationship. Make the most of every day with them.

### **Questions? We're Here!**

Boggy's Buddies is always happy to answer questions and support you throughout your hamster ownership journey. Reach us at [boggysbuddies@gmail.com](mailto:boggysbuddies@gmail.com) or find us on Facebook and Instagram.