



# Living with Companion Gerbils

## Description



## Gerbils As Pets

Gerbils are incredibly amusing, and social animals. By nature, gerbils are colony animals and are much happier and healthier when they have another gerbil companion. Therefore two gerbils are better than one. The best feature of gerbils is the fact that they are always curious. Even the simplest of toys can lead to a variety of different antics. They leap, jump, burrow and climb their way through everything. They rarely bite and enjoy socializing with people. Gerbils require minimal care, and are almost odour free.

**Please note** that gerbils are great pets for adults and children (over 6 years of age). Children should never be left as the sole providers and caregivers of any pet. Gerbils are small and delicate, and much care must be taken when handling to avoid injuries.



Gerbils grow to be about 50-60 grams, which is just a little larger than a hamster. The males are normally larger than the females. They come in dozens of different colours, such as black, agouti, gold, cinnamon, orange, and lilac. Most live from 3 to 5 years with the females outliving the males.

Gerbils have a need to groom, dine, and sleep with another of their kind. To maintain a healthy pet, a minimum of two should be adopted. These gerbils should be from the same family or clan. Mixing gerbils of different families or ages can result in territorial fights and fatalities. A simple rule of thumb with gerbils: same age, same gender and same family. The more gerbils housed together, the more chances there will be of territorial behaviour, fighting and injuries. Gerbils can mate when they are 35-45 days of age. To avoid the unwanted complications of pregnancy, babies, and further matings, ensure that the two gerbils are either both male or both female. Females will often live together without problems. Males can be kept together, if they are siblings, or introduced at an early age.

Gerbils are diurnal, being active both at night and during the day hours. As good pets, they require a consistent day and

night cycle, where the lights are turned on or curtains opened every day and closed every night.

## Gerbil – Proofing

Gerbil proofing an entire house is not possible or safe. If allowed to hop around loose, a small room is more than adequate to act like a huge amusement park. Cords and wires should be removed, all doors and windows closed, radiators and vents blocked off and any other loose pets removed. They must be completely supervised at all times. Like most small rodents, gerbils are chewers, and will gnaw at carpet, cords, wires and clothes. They are also very agile and can fit into holes about the size of loonies. Never underestimate the ability of a gerbil to escape!

## Training and Handling

Gerbils can be trained to climb on your shoulder or sit on your head. Some even pick up behaviours such as jumping up on the side of the cage indicating they want attention.

Taming gerbils can be much fun. Always allow newcomers to get familiar with their environment for a few hours before placing a hand in the cage. Training gerbils to allow themselves to be picked up often takes time, but getting them used to you is easy.



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Place your hand in the cage and allow them to come over and sniff, and crawl all over it. Do this many times before attempting to pick up the new gerbil. Feel free to offer a piece of apple, a sunflower seed, piece of carrot or another treat every time they climb onto your hand.

To pick up a gerbil, **never ever grab the tail, not even the base**. This can cause a broken tail or a degloving injury in which the skin comes right off the tail. The **best way** to pick up the gerbil is to use both hands, corner the gerbil in the cage, and scoop it up. If it keeps running away, grab a cup or tube and let the gerbil enter it (they are always curious), and place your hand over the open end and lift it out of the cage.

A fun activity, which is great for children and entertaining for the gerbil, is to sit in an empty bathtub and allow the gerbil to run around the tub and climb all over. Always make sure the bathroom door is closed, the drain is plugged, and a child sits reasonably still.

Much patience, time and understanding are required when adding a second gerbil to an already situated pet gerbil. Two cages are required, one for each gerbil, allowing gradual visual introductions without contact. After a week, switch their homes for a few hours each day for another week. Gradually start introducing the two together in a neutral, clean cage. Make sure

they are completely supervised and separate them immediately if fighting occurs. Never add a gerbil to an established group.

## Housing

Many different types of cages can be used for gerbils. Aquariums (10 or 20 gallons) work very well, as long as they are well aerated (covered with mesh) and kept out of direct sunlight and away from heat sources. Hamster or small animal cages also work well; however, some gerbils have a tendency to injure their noses by rubbing on the bars. Any cage should have a completely solid floor. Bars and slats can cause foot and leg injuries. Paper, corncob bedding or kiln dried pine shavings make good bedding. Other types of shavings and sand have a tendency to make the environment dusty leading to respiratory and ocular problems. Gerbils love to burrow, so make sure to have plenty of bedding. They also like to nest, and should have nesting materials like shredded newspaper, paper towel, or cotton bedding (not balls) added to the cage. For one to two gerbils, the cage should be cleaned every one to two weeks. The environment should be kept at room temperature 18-24 C, away from heat sources and direct sunlight, or cold drafts.

Branches, fruit tree clippings, pine cones and cardboard make excellent chew toys, which also help to work down the teeth and



prevent overgrowth and malocclusion problems. Toilet paper rolls, small boxes, and lego buildings make great amusing and adventurous games for gerbils. Gerbils are not as flexible as hamsters or other rodents, therefore hamster wheels or balls should not be added. Avoid small metal, plastic, wooden, fabric or foam toys or dishes, as they are often chewed and ingested. Plastic habitat tubes and trails are amusing if they are well cared for and supervised.

## Diet

Their basic diet consists of a seed mix, just like hamster food. For this reason, hamster and mice foods can be used, usually at 1 tablespoon per gerbil per day. Some gerbils may require more than that amount, and some less, so be sure to adjust the diet for your gerbil. These critters also enjoy variety, therefore mixing foods such as rabbit pellets, crushed oats, wheat, corn flakes, and sunflower seeds adds variety. However, they also require supplementation with fresh washed greens, vegetables and fruit. Gerbils are particularly fond of bananas, apples, carrots, dandelions and lettuce. Sunflower seeds make great treats, but too many can lead to obesity. Cheerios, Rice Krispies and small pieces of bread also make yummy treats.

Because they are a desert animal, gerbils drink very little

water, however they do require fresh water every day. Small shallow water bowls or bottles with sipper tubes can be used. Always be sure to check the sipper part to make sure it is not clogged. Since they drink very little water, they only urinate small amounts. Be sure to keep the water bottle out of direct sunlight to prevent algal growth within the bottle.



## Health

Diarrhea is rare with gerbils, but can happen with disease (Wet Tail – Tyzzer's Disease) or inadequate diet. These rodents are very susceptible to *Salmonella*, *Pasteurella* and *Bordetella* bacteria. Most lizards, birds and turtles carry *Salmonella*, whereas cats and rabbits harbour *Pasteurella* and some dogs carry *Bordetella*. Therefore, never allow these pets to come in contact with pet gerbils.

Gerbils have a sweat gland on the underside of the belly, which

is often mistaken as a tumour or abscess.

Epilepsy is one of the most common gerbil diseases. These seizures often do not require medical treatment. As the gerbil ages, the seizures decrease in frequency. Most only last a few minutes and do not cause permanent damage.

Gerbil teeth grow continuously and they do require things to chew on to help wear them down. Hard foods, such as pellets, and seeds help, but they often require special small rodent sticks and regular veterinary exams to make sure that the teeth do not overgrow and cause malocclusion.

Like other rodents, gerbils tend to hide signs of illness. Diarrhea, sneezing, 'being quieter than usual', and loss of appetite are urgent indicators to see a veterinarian.

## Gerbils and Other Animals

Due to their size, and the fact that they are considered prey animals, it is not advisable to allow a cat or a dog to interact with these pets. A fast grab or pounce may prove to be fatal.

Many bacteria which are part of the normal flora of other pets can cause disease in gerbils.





## Before you Make the Commitment...

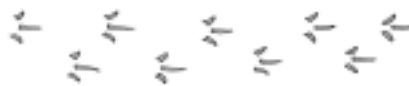
- ✓ Gerbils may require medical care. Have you planned in your budget for emergencies?
- ✓ If you rent, have you checked to be sure you are allowed to keep gerbils?
- ✓ What will you do with your gerbils during vacation time?
- ✓ Gerbils generally live to be 3 to 5 years old. Are you prepared for this commitment?
- ✓ Young children should not be left unsupervised with gerbils. Will you have the time to spend with the children and their pets? Will you teach them to handle the small animal gently and carefully?

- ✓ Do you have other pets to consider before taking a gerbil(s) home?
- ✓ Are there allergies in your family?
- ✓ Will gerbils fit into your home and lifestyle?

## Checklist

### Housing

- Aquarium with a mesh cover or rodent cage
- Shredded paper, corn cob litter, or kiln dried pine shavings as bedding
- Ceramic bowl for pellets and food
- Water bottle / shallow dish
- Nesting material



### Food

- Gerbil premix of seeds and pellets (hamster or small rodent food is adequate)
- Fresh water
- Fresh, washed vegetables and fruits
- Treats (sunflower seeds, bread, small rodent bars, wood sticks)

### Supplies

- Toys (toilet paper rolls, boxes, lego buildings, etc.)
- Good book on gerbil care

### Vet Care and More

- Annual check-up (teeth)
- Emergency medical care
- Vacation care

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