

Gerbils

Gerbils are naturally friendly and curious and can be happy and healthy almost anywhere.

HOME SWEET HOME

A quiet, dimly lit space, away from direct heat and sunlight is the best place for your gerbil's "home." Your gerbil needs a cage that's at least 24 inches long by 14 inches wide by 12 inches high with a solid floor. A converted aquarium tank works well. If you must use a wire cage, make sure that the wire mesh is no more than a centimeter apart. Gerbils may look plump, but they can squeeze through very small spaces. They're also great jumpers, so make sure your gerbil's cage has a secure top. Line the tank with newspaper and add "timothy hay" or shredded paper for burrowing. Avoid cedar shavings, which can irritate your gerbil's liver and respiratory system. Provide your gerbil with a cardboard or wooden "nesting" box, exercise toys, chewing blocks and paper towel tubes for playing and hiding in.

Gerbils like to create tidy spaces and will typically use one area of their cage as their bathroom area, which should be cleaned every day. The bedding in the rest of the cage should be changed twice a week. If you're using a tank, it should be disinfected and allowed to dry before adding new bedding and replacing your gerbil's paper towel tubes and playthings.

CHOW TIME

Commercial gerbil food will provide your gerbil with a balanced diet and is available at pet supply stores. You can supplement your gerbil's diet with puffed wheat, dried bananas, unsalted peanuts, unsalted sunflower seeds, dried kidney beans, dried lima beans, dried lentils, dried black-eyed peas and alfalfa hay. Use a sturdy crockery bowl that can't be tipped over and is easy to clean. Keep fresh water available in a suspended "licker" water bottle at all times.

HEALTH MATTERS

Gerbils have a life span of one to three years and reach sexual maturity at about five weeks of age.

For exercise, provide your gerbil with a wheel and/or a plastic ball to run around in. Be sure to supervise your gerbil while it's in the exercise ball.

HANDLING WITH CARE

When picking up your gerbil, approach it slowly and be careful not to startle it. Curl one hand over its body, with your fingers and thumb around its abdomen. Hold it securely, but don't squeeze. To carry your gerbil, place the other hand under its legs. The more you handle your gerbil, the friendlier and tamer it will be.

BEHAVIOR BITS

Gerbils are one of the few rodents that are awake during the day and sleep at night.

They're very sociable and enjoy each other's company, so it's best to keep them in pairs, if possible. If housed together at a young age, gerbils will live in harmony with each other regardless of their sex. Gerbils are loyal to their "family members" and tend to mate for life, but will be aggressive toward newcomers if introduced too quickly. In order to prevent unwanted litters, you'll want to make sure your gerbils are the same sex.

RESOURCES

The American Gerbil Society, 1673 E. 16th St., PMB#40, Brooklyn, NY 11229; <http://www.agsgerbils.org/>.

Gerbil Information Page: <http://www.gerbil-info.nl.com/gerbiluk.htm>