

HAMSTER CARE GUIDE

Because Your Tiny Night Goblin Has Big Life Plans

Bay Area Bird & Exotics Hospital

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You now live with a fuzzy underground architect who believes 2:00 AM is peak productivity. Hamsters are curious, energetic, and generally prefer interior decorating that involves hoarding snacks and redesigning their bedding daily. Most live 2–3 years and pack a lifetime of personality into that timeline.



MEET YOUR HAMSTER

Species	Size	Social Needs
Syrian (Golden) Hamster	Larger	Strictly solitary — one per enclosure, always
Dwarf (Winter White, Campbell's, Roborovski)	Small	Sometimes tolerate companions, but drama-capable roommates
Chinese Hamster	Small	Fast, excellent climbers, generally solitary



HOUSING — THE HAMSTER REAL ESTATE MARKET

- Hamsters are enthusiastic escape artists — if they can fit their head through a space, they will attempt a prison break
- Minimum floor space: **450 square inches** of uninterrupted floor space — bigger is always better
- **Solid bottom enclosure only** — no wire flooring, which causes foot and leg injuries
- Secure, escape-proof lid — non-negotiable for Syrian hamsters especially
- Deep bedding: **6–10 inches** preferred to allow natural burrowing behavior — shallow bedding is a welfare issue
- Hide box or nesting area — hamsters need a private space to feel secure
- **Solid exercise wheel** required — no wire or rung wheels, which trap feet and cause injury

Safe bedding options:

- Paper-based bedding, aspen shavings, or soft shredded paper nesting materials
- **Avoid** pine or cedar shavings (respiratory irritation), corn cob bedding, and stringy or fabric nesting material that can wrap around limbs



NUTRITION — THE “I WILL ONLY EAT THE COOKIES” PROBLEM

- Seed mixes encourage picky eating and nutritional imbalance — a hamster left to self-select will eat the fun bits and ignore the rest

Food	Amount	Notes
High-quality rodent block or pelleted diet	Primary food source, daily	Non-negotiable foundation of the diet
Fresh vegetables (leafy greens, bell peppers, squash, cucumber)	Small amounts daily	Introduce new items gradually
Occasional seeds	Sparingly	Treat only — not a dietary staple
Fresh water	Always available	Sipper bottle preferred — check daily for clogs

- Check the water bottle frequently for clogs — hamsters love stuffing food into water nozzles like tiny plumbers creating job security

Avoid dried fruits, fresh fruits, and sugary vegetables such as carrots and sweet potatoes — these cause diarrhea and contribute to diabetes, which is common in dwarf hamsters. Sugary treats of any kind should not be offered.

❏ EXERCISE & ENRICHMENT

- Hamsters are nocturnal — their zoom-time happens while you are considering sleep. This is normal and not a personal attack.
- **Solid-surface exercise wheel** — used nightly, often for several miles. Size matters: Syrian hamsters need a larger wheel.
- Tunnels, tubes, and cardboard boxes — hamsters are natural burrowers and architects
- Safe chew toys and hay huts — chewing is a dental necessity
- Supervised exploration in exercise balls or play areas — always supervised, time-limited, on safe surfaces

🗨️ HANDLING & BEHAVIOR

- Approach slowly and speak first — hamsters have poor eyesight and rely on sound and scent
- Scoop rather than grab — grabbing from above mimics a predator attack and will not go well
- Never wake abruptly — startled hamsters have opinions and teeth, and they will use both
- Children should always be supervised during handling — a dropped hamster is a serious injury risk

Hamsters may bite when:

- Frightened or startled
- Ill or in pain
- Handled roughly or grabbed suddenly
- Fingers are mistakenly identified as snacks — wash hands before handling if you've been near food

🔪 CLEANING & MAINTENANCE

Frequency	Tasks
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Daily	Remove soiled bedding spots, check food and water, observe appetite and activity level
Weekly	Replace most bedding (leave a small portion to preserve familiar scent), clean enclosure with mild soap and water, check for hidden spoiled food hoards

- Leave a small amount of existing bedding when cleaning — complete scent removal causes significant stress and behavioral disruption
- Check for hidden spoiled food during weekly cleans — hamsters hoard instinctively and forgotten fresh food rots quickly

VETERINARY CARE & HEALTH CONCERNS

- Hamsters hide illness well — by the time signs are visible, problems are often advanced

Sign to Watch For	What It May Indicate
Decreased appetite or weight loss	Dental disease, illness, or systemic disease
Diarrhea or “wet tail”	Bacterial and/or parasitic infection — wet tail is a serious emergency in young hamsters
Hair loss or excessive scratching	Mites, fungal infection, or hormonal disease
Difficulty breathing	Respiratory infection or cardiac disease
Lumps or swelling	Abscess, tumor, or cyst — common in older hamsters
Overgrown teeth	Malocclusion requiring veterinary dental care
Lethargy or behavior changes	Any number of conditions — warrants prompt evaluation
Drooling or cheek swelling	Cheek pouch impaction or abscess — requires veterinary attention

If your hamster stops eating, shows labored breathing, has diarrhea, or develops visible swelling — call us promptly. Hamsters decline quickly and early intervention makes a real difference.

EXPECTED PERSONALITY FEATURES

- Curious — everything is worth investigating, including things that are clearly not food
- Busy — there is always a project underway, usually involving relocating bedding at 3:00 AM
- Independent — they do not require your approval, though they may occasionally tolerate your company
- Mildly suspicious of sudden life events — a reasonable stance, honestly
- Adorable professional hoarders — do not take it personally when they stuff their cheeks with everything you just offered them

Questions? We’ve heard weirder ones. Call us.

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