



## **HAMSTERS AS PETS**

There are five types of hamsters commonly kept as pets:

### **THE SYRIAN HAMSTER**

This is the animal that most people associate with the word 'hamster', and was originally known as the 'Golden' hamster. Syrian hamsters commonly grow between 10 cm and 16 cm in length. This animal is solitary by nature and the golden rule is one Syrian hamster per cage. The animals meet **only** to mate, after which the female drives the male away. The pups are born after a mere 16 days, and are born blind and naked. However, they grow very quickly, and by four weeks old are usually fully weaned. Many colours and coat types of Syrian hamsters are now kept as pets.

### **THE CAMPBELL'S RUSSIAN DWARF HAMSTER**

These hamsters are usually known as 'Dwarf' or 'Russian'\* hamsters, growing up to 10 cm in length. They may live together - either two of the same sex or as a breeding pair, and sometimes in same sex groups. A pair can produce a litter of babies every eighteen days, so think carefully before deciding to keep both sexes together. Born blind and naked the pups develop faster than Syrian babies and are fully weaned by three weeks. This species comes in a wide range of colours and can also be Satin coated.

### **THE WINTER WHITE RUSSIAN DWARF HAMSTER**

Also known as the 'Dwarf' or 'Russian'\* hamster this species is often confused with the Campbell's hamster. It's distinctive Roman nose and oval shape easily sets it apart from the other species. Winter Whites usually grow up to 10 cm. Environmental conditions and breeding patterns are very similar to those of the Campbell's hamsters, however only two colours and two pattern mutations are recognised so far.

### **THE CHINESE HAMSTER**

Although not a true Dwarf hamster, due to its size the Chinese hamster is placed in this group. These animals also can live in pairs or small groups, however they can fall out so it is important to keep an eye out for bullying or any form of aggression and separate them if required. They are slightly longer and thinner than the two Russian hamster species, growing up to 9 cms in length. In addition to their elongated body length between the front and back legs, Chinese hamsters have a longer tail compared to the other pet species of hamster and this tail is prehensile. This allows the hamster to cling to objects, be it clothing or a finger well, they will wrap themselves around stick like

objects in a mouse-like way. A pair may have babies every twenty one days but are not as prolific as the Russians. The babies develop at about the same rate as Russian hamsters. There are already two or three colour variations available, standards have been set to the majority of these.

## THE ROBOROVSKI HAMSTER

The Roborovski's hamster, or "Robo", is the smallest member of the hamster family. Adults rarely exceed 7cm in length from the tip of the nose to their almost non-existent tail. Their care and maintenance is much the same as Russian hamsters. They are sociable and will usually live in pairs or groups, however they can fall out so it is important to keep an eye out for bullying or any form of aggression and separate them if required. They rarely, if ever, bite, but are difficult to handle, owing to their extremely active temperaments. There are now several colour variation to date.

*\* Please note that the two species of Russian Dwarf can be bred together to produce hybrids. Uneducated breeders have produced these hybrids and many hamsters labelled as Winter Whites or 'Russians' in the shops may in fact be hybrids. The breeding of hybrids is strongly discouraged by the NHC and is a practice that should be avoided as many have genetic or physical medical issues that can impact dramatically on their lives. Hybrids are disqualified from any NHC show.*

## GENERAL CARE

Hamsters are one of the best pets around, whether it's a Syrian or a Dwarf. They are very easy to look after and everything you need you can buy at any pet shop. A wide selection of cages is available, from the simple plastic tray and wire top to the totally enclosed plastic type complete with tubes. The enclosure must be large enough to allow the hamster to exercise and to establish separate toilet, feeding, food storage and nesting areas. If you can afford a slightly bigger cage of the same type (perhaps with 2 or 3 levels) so much the better, but do ensure that the young hamster cannot fall a distance greater than 19 cm. Syrian hamsters must be kept singly whereas the Dwarf and Chinese species can often live together with others of their own species. If you intend keeping the Dwarf varieties in a wire top cage the bars must not be more than 9 mm apart as these animals can get through very small gaps. This is especially important or Roborovski hamsters.

A substrate\* (such as wood shavings or sawdust) should be spread on the base of the cage and a handful of nesting put in a corner which the hamster will use to make its nest. The nesting\* material should be of the shredded paper variety. Never use synthetic 'fluffy' bedding, as it can be ingested by the hamster causing intestinal obstruction.

It is recommended that a water bottle be used, with the spout fitted at the right height on the cage for your hamster to reach, as a dish containing water is easily fouled. The hamster should have access to fresh water at all times. About an egg-cupful of dry hamster mix per day should be given (this varies hamster to hamster) and 'fresh' food introduced very gradually and in small quantities.

Most hamsters do not smell if they are cleaned regularly, say once a week. As they normally use one corner of the cage as a toilet, the substrate in this corner can be

changed more often if you wish. When cleaning, the substrate and old food should be thrown away and the cage base washed and dried. Place fresh substrate in the cage, and new nesting material if needed. Rinse the water bottle and fill with fresh water. Then give your hamster its daily helping of food plus a little extra for its store.

When choosing a hamster check that it is bright eyed and holds its ears erect. It should have a dry and clean rear end and be free from open or healing cuts and should not bite when picked up. Ideally, a hamster should be between five and eight weeks old when bought and you should be able to handle it. At this age they may be fast, so care must be taken in the first few days. Always handle only a few inches above a secure surface in case the young animal should be scared and jump. If you require further information about keeping and exhibiting hamsters, are looking for hamster breeders in your area, or would like to know more about finding a local club, please visit our website.

*\*For more info on substrates and nesting material, visit our website [www.hamsters-uk.org](http://www.hamsters-uk.org)*

## HOUSING HAMSTERS

A useful cage, and one used by many breeders, is the type comprising what resembles a 'cat litter' tray with a wire top clipped to it. Hamsters love climbing and will get plenty of exercise in this type of cage.

Also on the market are the all or nearly all plastic cages, comprising a number of compartments linked by tubes (often known as modular caging). These look attractive and will stop draughts, although are expensive to buy if a suitable size is used. The cage may need to be taken apart to get the hamster out until it gets to know its owner and will come to its owner's voice. These cages do, however, come into their own if you also have a cat or dog as the hamster is protected against claws. Poor ventilation and condensation may be an issue if your hamster chooses to nest in the tubes.

Glass or plastic aquariums can also be used but a lid made with 1 cm x 1 cm wire mesh is required, as the standard hood has little or no ventilation, and so condensation can form. The lid can be made by making a wooden frame that just fits outside the tank and fixing the wire to this. Remember, if you have anything hanging in the tank the hamster is liable to climb this and push the lid off if it is not secured in some way. It is important to remember you must secure your hamsters from 'predators' as well as preventing your hamster from escaping. With all cages, remember that hamsters' teeth keep growing all their lives and they must always chew something hard to keep their teeth at the right length.

Large moulded plastic cages are gaining in popularity, due to their large floor size, the protection from animals from secure sides (which keep substrate in) good ventilation as they often have large wire grill set into the moulded lid top which opens to provide easy access to the hamster. They can though be rather expensive and are often sold for larger rodents, some have too great a bar spacing on the wire grill but this can be overcome by securely attaching 1 cm x 1 cm mesh to this panel.

Whatever hard materials you put in for hamsters to chew, the odds are that they will prefer to chew the bars of the cage, or the edges of any plastic. This is all quite normal.

Food dishes can be bought and used but normally the hamster will pouch the food and then put it in its store, so the food can just be put in the substrate. As this does not look tidy, many people prefer to use a dish. However, since hamsters must chew, a plastic dish can gradually disappear. A useful substitute is the plastic top of a coffee jar - this will still be chewed but can be replaced from the next jar of coffee. This does not harm the hamster, but if you want to be very careful you can buy pottery or stainless steel dishes. Sprinkling the food around the cage can help provide the hamster with a more stimulating environment as they will have to forage for their food as they would in the wild. A commercial wood chew or dog biscuit should be provided for the hamster to chew on. Remember though that the biscuit needs to be plain, low in salt and not chocolate coated or with onion or garlic.

Care should be taken when positioning the cage as this is most important. Do not place in direct sunlight and make sure it is out of draughts. The cage can be kept in the house or in a frost-free shed or garage but if kept in the latter more bedding must be provided. If kept indoors do not put near radiators or fires as extremes of temperature are harmful. As long as there is no sudden change in temperature the hamster will be safe. If the cage is kept in a bedroom spilt substrate can be a problem, but if you get a cardboard box about 5 cm bigger than the base of the cage and cut it down to about 10 cm high, the cage can stand in this and most of the substrate will be caught.

## TOYS

Wheels will always be a controversial subject when it comes to 'toys' in a hamster's cage but most hamsters do enjoy an exercise wheel. The 'open running track' or runged style of wheel can lead to problems with legs slipping and breaking, the plastic versions of runged wheel additionally tend to be chewed causing them to drop off the spindle and be useless. A little trick to try on this type of wheel is to fix some cardboard around the outside of the wheel - the legs can no longer slip through but the hamster can get a grip on the rungs. The solid plastic type is safer, the larger and wider the better. Wheels can be a problem with long-haired hamsters, as the hair catches around the spindle and can be pulled out. Keep an eye on your hamster and its wheel, if you see it marking the fur or if it is a big hamster and its back is really bent when running on the wheel, a larger wheel should be provided.

Many toys can be bought for your hamster, including seesaws, tunnels, climbing blocks and ladders, but a lot you can make yourself. Cardboard rolls can be hung on wire in the cage or a plastic squash bottle with the top and bottom cut off can be hung up. A wooden shelf can be put in most cages and hamsters love to climb on these to groom themselves.

Your hamster will love to come out of its cage to play, but you must keep an eye on it as they can get through the smallest spaces and can get lost very easily. A play box is a good idea and a cheap one can be made from a plastic water tank, storage box, or an even cheaper one from a large robust corrugated cardboard box. If you get such a box, cut it down to about 30 cm high and toys can be put inside, but remember do not leave the hamster alone as it will chew its way out. A bath can be a great place for the hamster – as long as it is dry! Make sure it is perfectly dry, perhaps lining it with towels, then either place in toys etc to create a secure playpen, or use it as a place a small child

can play with the hamster in a secure environment. Being in the dry bath with the hamster the child can learn how to hold and handle the hamster in safety, while the hamster explores and climbs over the child getting used to its smells and ways.

Play balls can be used for exercise or a place to put a hamster in while you clean the cage, but do not leave them in one for more than a few minutes at a time.

In the end, whatever type of cage you use and whatever type of toy, please remember to handle your hamster regularly and, above all, enjoy your pet.

## **SYRIAN AND DWARF CAGE REQUIREMENTS**

The first and most important thing to remember about housing Syrian hamsters is **one hamster per cage**. Although a hamster will almost always be gentle and loving with you, well meaning people think they are lonely, but if you keep two Syrian hamsters together before long fighting will take place. This could result in serious injuries or even death.

Unlike Syrian hamsters, Dwarf hamsters can live together. Russian Campbell's may be kept in single sex pairs or groups as may Roborovskis, Russian Winter Whites seem to prefer to be in pairs. Chinese hamsters again can be kept singly or in pairs. In all cases do not mix males and females even siblings unless intending to breed. **Never** mix the species, as fighting will break out.

With any pairings or groups fighting may break out. It is important to watch out for signs of fighting or of bullying. Though there will often be dominance play/scuffles and overly enthusiastic or unwanted grooming, signs of actual aggression are usually easy to distinguish from harmless bickering. If blood is drawn, split the hamsters immediately and house separately from then on. Occasionally one hamster will deprive another (or others) of access to food or water, it is therefore advisable to offer food spread out in the substrate (scatter feed), or in multiple bowls and also supply multiple water bottles to help prevent this occurring.

Dwarf hamsters do require different housing to Syrians - because of their small size they may squeeze through the bars of normal cages. They may be kept in the 'cat-litter tray' type of cage provided the barred top has spaces of no more than 9 mm between the bars. They do live very happily in glass tanks with wire lids (small gauge mesh) and in plastic tanks with inter-connecting tubes. If in the latter, ensure that the tubes are lined with wire mesh so the hamster can grip and travel along them. Any modular form of caging with separated areas is only suitable for single Dwarfs, with pairs or groups the separate areas will encourage fighting.

Like Syrian hamsters, Dwarf hamsters are great escape artists, so do ensure that any home for them is secure. Dwarfs love to burrow, as in the wild, so do give them a deeper layer of substrate.

## **FEEDING**

A hamster that is fed a well-balanced diet is usually a healthy hamster. Hamsters are omnivores so may be fed a mixed diet. Having acquired a hamster it is up to you to feed it a diet that gives a little variety and keeps your pet healthy.

Ask, when you buy, what the hamster has been fed on as, although hamsters like a

variety of foods, introducing too many new foods at one time can cause tummy upsets. **Always** introduce greens and any new foods gradually and in very small amounts if you are not sure what your hamster has been fed before.

The basic and major part of the diet should be a proprietary complete dry hamster mix which can be bought from a pet shop and has the correct dietary balance. This will be a mixture of seeds, crushed oats, flaked maize, sunflower seeds, locust beans, peanuts etc. with some hard dry biscuits. All these are 'hard' and good for the hamster's teeth, and a small handful of this mixture should be given each day. As a treat, more hard dry biscuits can be given, such as 'all in one' cat rings, alongside traditional wooden chews for your hamster it can be beneficial to offer a dog biscuit (e.g. Biscrok) or cat biscuits. The meaty taste is often appealing to the hamster and so provides something useful for the animal to chew on to wear down their ever-growing teeth.

## TREATS

Hamsters are hoarders - they store their food behind or under their beds so greens and soft foods must only be given in moderation, otherwise anything that is uneaten will go mouldy which is unhealthy for the hamster. As hamsters put their food into their cheek pouches sticky and sharp foods should be avoided. Chocolate (which can melt when pouched) and hay (which can scratch the pouches) are two such foods.

To help your hamster grow strong bones and teeth some milky foods can be given. Some will enjoy milk on its own, others a little runny porridge, a few rice crispies with milk or even bread and milk, all without sugar of course. Any of these should be removed before the milk sours, if uneaten. Some hamsters appreciate some extra protein, foods like egg (boiled or unseasoned scrambled), nuts, or a little cooked plain chicken can be given. Fresh water, preferably in a bottle, should **always** be available.

All species of hamster may be fed as above, but Dwarf hamsters (Russian, Chinese etc) will appreciate the smaller type of seed - millet, budgie seed, foreign finch seed - in addition. Care should be taken to avoid feeding any treat with added sugar (e.g. commercial honey sticks) to Campbell's or Hybrids due to the increased risk of them developing diabetes. Many Dwarf hamsters (and some Syrians) also enjoy mealworms (either dried sold for wild birds or alive!) and they are a great source of protein.

## GREENS

Carrots, cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, sprouts, broad beans, peas, runner beans, apple, bean sprouts, sweet corn, cooked potato and cucumber can all be given in small quantities. A slice of apple **or** the core, **or** a small floret of cauliflower, **or** a small sprout, **or** two broad beans would be enough at any one time. You will soon discover what your hamster enjoys and how much your hamster can eat without any tummy upset. Citrus fruits should never be given.

A very special treat would be a raisin or sultana. These are greatly enjoyed, as is lettuce but too much lettuce is not good for a hamster.

## WILD GREENS

Hamsters really enjoy dandelions and groundsel but you have to be especially careful about these - picked by the roadside they could have been sprayed or covered

with car fumes etc. so unless you can be certain that they are really **safe** to eat don't give them to your hamster.

All greens should be fresh and washed.

## HANDLING YOUR HAMSTER

When you purchase a hamster always make sure that whoever is selling it, handles it. Never buy a hamster that has been chased into a box or has been caught by someone wearing gloves so that you are the first person to touch it. When you get your newly acquired hamster home, place the cage in its intended position, avoiding draughts and direct sunlight. Leave overnight for the hamster to settle down and get used to its new surroundings. Talking quietly to your hamster will help it get used to your voice.

Always approach the hamster gently with no sudden movements, so as not to scare it. If it is asleep, gently tap the cage or nest to wake it up, and let it walk out of its nest. Never just grab the hamster while it is asleep in its nest. You will startle it and it might bite you in fear.

For the first few times it might be better to remove the top part of the cage, if possible, so you can pick up your hamster more easily without having to chase it around the cage. It is a good idea to place the cage inside a large box first, so that when you lift the top off the cage the hamster cannot run away.

You can pick up your hamster by placing one hand firmly but gently around its body, with its head pointing towards your wrist and placing it immediately into the palm of your other hand or you may wish to cup both hands together and lift your hamster up. Either way is suitable, use whichever you find the easiest.

Lift the hamster gently just a few inches from the cage, then, if it should jump out of your hands it will not fall and hurt itself. Speak gently and quietly as you handle your hamster and stroke it gently, avoid touching its head. If it struggles to escape your grasp, never tighten your grip as you may hurt it and again it may bite.

Therefore, if it struggles place it back down and a few seconds later try and pick it up again. Repeat this process until it feels more secure in your hand. Once it knows that you are not going to hurt it and you both become more confident you will find your hamster waiting to come out to be handled. They also like to sit on your arm held close to your body and cupped with the other hand; it makes them feel safe and secure.

It is a good idea not to give your hamster a house for the first few weeks as this can make encouraging the hamster out more difficult. Once the hamster comes to your voice the house can be introduced should you so wish.

One rule to remember is always making sure your hands are clean before handling your hamster. They cannot see very well and rely on their sense of smell, so if you have been eating anything nice such as sweets etc., it may take a nibble of your finger thinking it is something nice to eat!

Finally as a matter of hygiene always wash your hands again once you have finished handling your hamster.

## **ABOUT THE NATIONAL HAMSTER COUNCIL**

The National Hamster Council (NHC) is the governing body of the hamster fancy in the United Kingdom, representing the interests of all concerned with the keeping, exhibiting and/or breeding of the 5 species of hamster commonly kept as pets. As the world's leading hamster organisation, the NHC has an unrivalled reputation, and its standards and show rules have been used - and continue to be used - by hamster Clubs and societies in many countries.

Established in 1949, the NHC is the oldest such organisation in the world and its member Clubs cover the whole of the UK, with members throughout the world.

With an established network of experienced and knowledgeable officers and advisors, the NHC and its affiliated Clubs offer benefits to everyone interested in all types of hamsters. Our Clubs organise regular shows in Britain, where everyone is welcome - from beginner to experienced breeder. There are classes for pet as well as exhibition hamsters, and shows are the ideal opportunity to view many of the hundreds of colour combinations of Syrian hamster, not to mention the popular species of dwarf hamsters - Chinese, Campbell's, Winter White and Roborovski.

We have a wealth of experience and expertise within the NHC, with some of our members having kept, bred and exhibited hamsters for over 30 years. This unique pool of knowledge is made available to every member through our information sheets, by personal contact and through our monthly Journal, which is packed with news, anecdotes, hamster keeping advice and show results. We are pleased to announce the launch of an electronic version of this journal, which is available to download online worldwide.

### **Benefits of membership include:-**

A monthly journal, containing articles of both general and special interest, access to knowledge gained by some of the most experienced hamster fanciers in the world, the opportunity to attend regular shows held throughout the UK, information sheets covering all aspects of hamster keeping, exhibiting, feeding, handling, breeding etc. and access to recognised breeders of all varieties of hamsters.

Membership of our Clubs is open to everyone (UK and worldwide) with an interest in hamsters, and we endeavour to maintain subscription rates at affordable levels, ensuring that all members receive excellent value for money.

For full details of membership of National Hamster Council affiliated clubs throughout the UK, visit our website at:-

**[www.hamsters-uk.org](http://www.hamsters-uk.org)**

or individual Club websites:-

Midland & Southern Hamster Club - [www.mashamster.club](http://www.mashamster.club)

Northern Hamster Club - [www.northernhamsterclub.co.uk](http://www.northernhamsterclub.co.uk)