



Zoo, Avian, Aquatic and Unusual Pets  
Veterinary Consultancy

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## Caring for your gerbil



### Your gerbil

The common gerbil, *Meriones unguiculatus* also known as the Mongolian gerbil or Mongolian desert mice originated from deserts in North Africa and central Asia. Due to their origins they are well adapted to digging and burrowing out homes in the sand and are diurnal. Being active during dusk and dawn, the cooler times of the day.

Gerbils are popular pets due to their small, cute appearance, curious personalities, mild temperaments and general lack of odour.

They can live between 3- 4 years if cared for appropriately. Here are some following tips to help you care for your gerbil:

### Gerbil accommodation

#### **Cage size:**

A gerbils home is called a gerbilarium. Please note, a hamster cage is not suitable for gerbils.

Gerbils should be kept in pairs as a minimum. The following cage sizes are suitable for two or more gerbils.

The minimum size is still discussed by experts but below are a few options you can try to follow:

- A minimum floor size of 100cm long by 40cm wide by 40cm tall (Bluecross,2023)
- Use of a 10 gallon fish tank. Which is 50.8cm x 25.4cm x 30.48cm (MSD,2023)

Always provide the largest size enclosure you can for your gerbil. This will allow them to carry out as many normal behaviours as possible.

Blue Cross,2023. *Caring for your pet gerbil*. Online at: <https://www.bluecross.org.uk/advice/gerbil/caring-for-your-gerbil> (Accessed 03.11.2023)

MSD Veterinary Manual, 2023. *Providing a home for a gerbil*. Online at: <https://www.msdrvetermanual.com/all-other-pets/gerbils/providing-a-home-for-a-gerbil> (Accessed 03.11.2023)



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## **Cage design:**

With any cage design ensure it is fully secure and escape proof. Gerbils are apt at climbing and squeezing through tight spaces. Usually the area of easy escape is the lid. We recommend securing this with extra mechanisms other than what the cage arrives with.

The gerbilarium should be made of solid glass walls on the bottom with a secure mesh wire on top. Often a glass fish tank can be used but ensure the lid on top has breathable mesh wire rather than the standard plastic tops used for fish. The mesh wire should not have holes large enough for the gerbil to escape through and should be easy to secure to the top of your tank.

Cages that are predominately made from metal bars can cause injury to your gerbil as they will climb the wire and can fall or trap their limbs and tail causing injuries. They can also not be able to exhibit wire gnawing which can damage their teeth.

The enclosure will be deep to allow for burrowing into their substrate. At least one third of the tank should be full of easy to burrow into substrate. Popular substrate choices include bedding made from hemp, aspen or corncob shavings.

Please note that aspen is not sawdust. Aspen doesn't produce harmful dust that could cause respiratory problems and irritate a gerbil's eyes. Aspen will give another texture to the enclosure however, it's not great at holding up burrows on its own so another bedding would need to be mixed with it.

Gerbils are ideally kept at temperatures between 20 °C and 24°C. They should be kept in a damp and draft free area of the house away from any items that produce ultrasound. For example, televisions or computers. This is because a gerbil's hearing is highly sensitive to these sound waves and may cause seizures in gerbils.

Bedding areas for gerbils will usually consist of their own homemade tunnels but you can provide them with cardboard tunnels, a wooden hide or a plant pot as alternative sleeping areas. Ensure that you provide a sleeping area large enough for all your gerbils as they will sleep together.

Dust baths using chinchilla sand should be provided in a small bowl to allow your gerbil to keep their coat in good condition. Be aware that some gerbils will use the dust bath like a litter tray and so this should be checked and changed regularly.

## **Enrichment**

Providing plenty of substrate to burrow into allows your gerbil to exhibit their natural activities.

As gerbils travel large distances you can also provide a wheel to help them 'run' of their excess energy. The "Flying saucer" exercise wheels are preferable over



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“regular” exercise wheels to minimize the risk of back and limb problems. The larger “flying saucer” wheels do not force the animal into an abnormal hyperextended back position, but individuals can still develop limb problems due to abnormal loading of joints and muscles. Any wheel provided should be solid to prevent the inadvertent damaging or fracturing of a hind leg or tail if it gets pushed between the wire slats.

Hiding food around your gerbil’s enclosure, within tubes and various hides will allow your gerbil to exhibit normal foraging behaviour. Ditch the bowl unless you need to monitor your gerbil’s food intake for health reasons.

Gerbils have continuously growing teeth so you must provide them with suitable gnawing material to keep them down. Suitable chews can be made from untreated wood, sisal string, cardboard and paper.

Further accessories include using hanging toys such as coconut shells to encourage natural behaviour and rocks to be used as ‘lookout’ places and gerbils can also wear down their teeth and nails on these.

Hamster balls have been known to be used as exercise outside a gerbil’s enclosure. These are no longer recommended as they can be dangerous and cause undue stress. The following are reasons as to why we do not recommend a ball as an exercise activity:

- Gerbils rely on their sense of touch, smell and hearing to get around and become stressed when they cannot use them effectively when in the ball.
- They have no access to their food and water which can be very stressful to them.
- The constant running in this way (similar to an upright wheel that is too small) can cause damage to their back.
- A ball has very poor ventilation and often gerbils will defecate or urinate in the ball due to stress.
- Often gerbils are put in individually and being separated from their companion can be very stressful.

For further information on hamster balls please take a look at the RSPCA guidelines on them: <https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/rodents/hamsters/health>

It is much better for a gerbil to be handled gently by you daily and placed into a playpen for you to interact with each other safely. This way you can also check your gerbils’ health and spot any problems early.

### **Cage mates**

Gerbils are highly sociable animals and must be kept in a pair as a minimum. Gerbils of the same sex which grow up together often do well. If gerbils are over 10



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weeks of age and introduced to each other they can sometimes fight. Introductions must be slow and if any aggression occurs the gerbils should be kept separate.

If keeping males and females together, castrating the males is highly recommended. Gerbils become sexually mature from 10-12 weeks of age and can have 3-6 pups per litter.

### **Handling your gerbils**

Allow your gerbil to become used to your hand and smell before attempting to pick them up. Do this frequently over a few days. You may even find that they will hop up onto your outstretched hand if given enough time.

When picking them up for the first few times you can dim the lights and reduce any noise to help them feel calmer. Cup one hand under your gerbil's body so that they can grip onto your hand and feel secure. Use your other hand to loosely cover the top of your gerbil to help prevent them from jumping out of your hand. Do not fully enclose your gerbil into your hands as they will feel trapped and may become stressed.

Gerbils can be very quick so it is advisable to have a play pen close by in which to place them into so that they can not escape and get lost should they jump out of your hands.

**Never** pick up a gerbil by their tail. Gerbils can shed the outer layer of skin and hair on their tail as a defence mechanism to escape a predator. This however can leave bones and muscle's exposed which will be painful, can be prone to infection and take time to heal.

### **Diet**

Gerbils are omnivores. They can be fed a specific pellet diet which will contain **18-20% protein** alongside a mix of fruits and vegetables.. Always give your gerbil a variety for them to gain different health benefits and to add enrichment to their day. Pellets should be given over the seed or grain mixes that are available as they prevent your gerbil from picking out just what they want ie. Just eating the fatty sunflower seeds and becoming fussy eaters

Below are a few examples of safe foods that can be given:

#### **Fruits:**

- Apples
- Blueberries



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- Cranberries
- Cucumber
- Melon
- Peach
- Pear
- Raspberries
- Strawberries

### **Vegetables/Plants**

- Basil
- Broccoli
- Cabbage
- Carrot
- Cauliflower
- Dandelion
- Fennel
- Pepper
- Pumpkin
- Sweet potato (cooked)

Do **NOT** feed avocado, uncooked potatoes, rhubarb leaves or grapes.

Being desert animals gerbils do not consume much water however fresh clean water must be provided daily. Water should be provided in a drip bottle that does not leak. Check it daily to ensure it is not dripping and getting your gerbils enclosures wet. Gerbils should be kept nice and dry to prevent any health issues.

### **Medical conditions**

Commonly seen conditions include:

- Dental issues -overgrown incisors
- Diarrhoea
- Respiratory infections
- Tumours

Frequent handling of your gerbil will allow you to spot any issues. Always ensure your gerbil is eating and drinking their normal amount but also not struggling to do this. You should also ensure they are passing normal urine and faeces and again not struggling when they do this. If you notice any change in their behaviour this could be



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an early warning sign that something is wrong. Closely monitor your gerbil and call us for an appointment should you be worried.

We recommend annual health checks with our vets to ensure your gerbil is healthy and allow any problems to be addressed early.

### **Insurance**

Unfortunately, we can never predict what may happen to our gerbils, so we highly recommend getting pet insurance. A monthly fee can give you peace of mind knowing your pet is covered for the best treatment should anything happen. There are many insurance companies available, so we advise contacting each of them to find a policy that is right for you. We advise a policy that will cover your gerbil for its whole lifetime, for chronic illnesses and for the maximum amount that is available. If this is not possible then covering your gerbil for as much as you can afford will give you peace of mind should an accident or emergency occur.

We hope you have fun caring for your gerbil. Please call us on 0333 800 1602 should you require an appointment.