

CARING FOR YOUR GERBIL

Gerbils are fascinating pets and will fit in well with most families. They are inquisitive, rarely bite and are found in many colours. There are about 90 species, but the Mongolian gerbil is the one kept as a pet. They are sometimes mistaken for mice or rats, but they actually look and behave differently. Gerbils have long, hairy tails and, as you'll find out, are serious diggers!

Because gerbils originate from desert and dry grassland areas they do not produce much urine and waste, so it's fairly easy to keep their environment clean and free from smells. They are very sociable and should not be kept alone. However, they breed from three months old and can produce a litter of four to ten babies every 24 days, so it's best to keep pairs or small groups of the same sex.

Only buy gerbils from a knowledgeable breeder or good pet shop where the assistants know how to care for them and are able to handle the gerbils confidently. They should be in clean accommodation of ample size (see right) with food and fresh water available. Cages should also have beds and bedding. Babies should not be sold until they are at least five to six weeks old.

Males become sexually mature at 70 to 80 days old and females at 86 to 109 days. Females can become pregnant again within 24 hours of giving birth, so it's important that males and females are kept separate in pet shops. The staff in the shop should be able to show you how to tell the difference between males and females. If staff aren't sure, you may end up with a pregnant gerbil.

HOME COMFORTS

In the wild, gerbils live in underground tunnels up to 3m long with several entries and chambers. The best way to mimic this natural habitat and keep them happy is to house them in a large tank or old aquarium with a secure wire lid and plenty of material for them to dig and tunnel into. Wire cages are unsuitable because the bedding will be kicked out. You can also get gerbilariums or tanks with cage additions which are ideal for this type of pet.

Two gerbils need a minimum floor surface of 40cm x 75cm, by at least 30cm tall because they are such good jumpers. Keep the tank or aquarium away from draughts and direct sunlight or heat. As these little animals are active during the evening – and occasionally during the day – you may not want to keep their tank in a bedroom. You are not likely to disturb them, but they may disturb you!

Gerbils need a thick layer of dust- extracted bedding to dig into. Organic soil or peat are great natural beddings for your gerbil along with meadow or Timothy hay, plus shredded

paper for nesting. Don't use fluffy material as this can wrap around gerbils' limbs and injure them. Gerbils also like a nest box – but not made of wood or plastic, which they'll chew. A clay flowerpot cut in half makes a good sleeping area. A dust bath of chinchilla sand (available from most pet shops) should be provided so the gerbil can keep its coat clean and in good condition.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Most gerbil owners like to feed commercial mixes as the basis of their pets' diet but they should also be given fresh vegetables and fruit. Earthenware or stainless steel feed bowls should be used. Don't worry about them burying their feed bowl under their bedding, as it's natural for them to store and hoard food.

Gerbils enjoy apples, carrots, broccoli, sprouts and cauliflower. Lettuce can be given occasionally but only in very small amounts. Don't feed potatoes, rhubarb or tomato leaves as these are poisonous. Also ensure your gerbils have a constant supply of fresh water. This should be provided in a free-access water bottle fixed inside the tank because water bowls will be tipped over and buried.

HEALTH MATTERS

A healthy gerbil has bright eyes, a glossy coat and is alert and lively – except in the daytime when sleepy. A runny or sticky nose or eyes, dull coat and/or lethargy are signs of ill health and need veterinary advice. Like other rodents, gerbils have upper incisor teeth that continue to grow throughout their lives.

They keep them at the right length by gnawing on things, so provide a small branch from a fruit tree, such as apple (check it has not been sprayed with pesticides) or wooden chew toys available from pet shops.

EXERCISE AND ENTERTAINMENT

Gerbils love to dig and burrow, so make sure they have enough bedding to do this to their hearts' content. They have enormous fun with cardboard tubes, like toilet roll tubes, and will run through them and chew them. They also like fruit tree branches to climb on and, if you put a flat rock in the tank, they may use it as a lookout point.

COMPANY

Gerbils naturally live in a group, so it's not fair to keep one on its own. If you buy two or more baby gerbils of the same sex – from the same litter or harmonious group – they should get on well. However, adult gerbils (ie. over ten weeks old) can be aggressive towards any newcomers to the group.

Females are often more aggressive than males. If you have to introduce an older gerbil, split the tank with a wire frame so they can see and smell but not injure each other and swap sides so that the tank picks up the scent of both gerbils. After three or four days they should settle together without a barrier, but it's important to keep an eye on them to make sure they don't fight and injure one another.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

Gerbils are usually friendly and happy to be handled although some can be timid. Start by placing your hand in the tank so the gerbils can sniff and get used to you, then gently stroke them. Pick up a gerbil by placing your hand around its body, just behind the forelegs, and support the hindquarters in your other hand. Never handle a gerbil by the end of its tail as it can easily be injured. Children should only handle gerbils under adult supervision in case they accidentally squeeze too hard.

GERBILS AS CHILDREN'S PETS

Gerbils are quick and agile and young children could find it quite difficult to hold them without squeezing too hard. If you have young children and want them to be able to handle their pet, it may be better to choose a different species. For older children, gerbils can make entertaining pets but it's important that an adult is responsible for, and interested in, overseeing their care and well-being.

DON'T FORGET...

- Female gerbils breed from the age of about three months and males from ten weeks, so it is best to keep pairs or small groups of the same sex
- Gerbils should always have access to water – just providing fresh fruit and vegetables is not enough
- Gerbils should have things to chew, such as an apple tree branch, or wooden toys
- Gerbils are most active during the evening