

Hamsters

Syrian & Russian Dwarf Hamsters



An opal Russian dwarf hamster.

Syrian Hamsters

In 1931 the Syrian (or Golden) Hamster made its appearance in England. These animals came from a breeding program established in Jerusalem from specimens caught in Syria. Only one male and two females survived, and it is from these three that all domestic stock was produced. The Syrian Hamster arrived in the United States in 1938, but did not become popular until the late '40s and into the '50s.

The Syrian Hamster has a short, cobby, barrel shaped body measuring about 7–8 inches long. They come in many colors such as the original Golden, Cinnamon, Rust, Dark Grey, Light Grey, Yellow, Cream, Black, and even Tortoiseshell. They also come in a number of different coat types including Shorthaired, Longhaired (also known as Teddy Bear), Rex, and Satin.

The Syrian Hamster is a solitary animal, and must be kept singly after age of 8–10 weeks. If kept together any longer than that, vicious fighting will break out resulting in either serious injury or death.

Russian Dwarf Hamsters

The Russian Dwarf Hamster is a relative newcomer to the world of domestic pets. In 1963 they were being kept in zoos in England, and in 1970 they were introduced to the pet market. They came to the United States in the early 1980s, and have only been legal in California since 1994.

There are two types of Russian Dwarf Hamsters, the Campbell's Russian Dwarf, *Phodopus sungoris campbelli*, and the Winter White Russian Dwarf, *Phodopus sungoris sungoris*. A third type of dwarf hamster, the Chinese Hamster, is currently illegal in California.

The Russian Dwarf Hamster has a bullet shaped body, about 3 inches in length, with the male being slightly larger than the female. They have short, broad heads with small round ears. Their tail is barely visible, and their feet are furred. Their fur is dense, with a thick undercoat, and the natural color is greyish brown with a slate undercoat. They come in a number of colors including Normal, Albino, Argente, Opal, and Platinum. There are only two coat types, Normal and Satin.

Dwarf Hamsters are gregarious animals and can be kept in same sex pairs or groups. Dwarfs do squabble from time to time making annoying noises. In spite of all the noise, rarely is even a scratch seen on the animals. This seems to occur more often with females than males.

Hamsters As Pets

Both the Syrian and the Dwarf hamster make good pets. Because of their size and affordability, hamsters are an obvious choice for first time pet owners. When handled often, they become quite tame. Both are similar in their needs and care, but are somewhat different in temperament and personality.

Syrian hamsters are very nocturnal and do not like to be disturbed while the sun is up. They quickly learn to tolerate and even enjoy gentle handling, though they do not necessarily crave it. Dwarf hamsters are gregarious, and are more people oriented than their Syrian relatives. Though supposedly nocturnal, they can often be seen running on their wheels during the day. Neither type of hamster is as demanding of attention as a rabbit, guinea pig, or rat.

Hamsters are not just “kids pets.” In fact, they are not necessarily ideal for kids. There are, however, enthusiasts all over the world who collect, breed, and show these little critters strictly because they are such wonderful animals.

As with all animals, it is always best to get a hamster from a breeder since these people handle their animals and breed for good temperaments. Like puppies, small animals such as hamsters sold in pet shops are mass produced without any thought to temperament or health.



Written by
Nancy Ferris

How To Care For Your Hamster



A Home For Your Hamster

A wide selection of cages and cage types are available for hamsters. For Syrians, either a 10-gallon (or larger) aquarium with a screen lid makes a good home. Another alternative is the wire cage with a plastic bottom, many of which have multiple levels and a cat litter pan for easy cleaning. For Dwarf Hamsters, the large plastic carrier type cages are ideal, as are 10-gallon aquariums. Another type of cage that is better suited to the Dwarf Hamsters are the modular systems (i.e., Habitrail, S.A.M., etc.). These can get complicated and expensive with all the tubes and attachments, but the animals enjoy them. Remember, the more attachments, the more cleaning time is involved. [Update: The CHA web site has a page on cages <https://californiahamsterassociation.com/cage-page>, Ed.]

Think about where to place your hamsters cage. Being nocturnal, hamsters are most active at night, while spending most of their days sleeping. It might be best to keep their cage in the den or living room rather than a bedroom where nighttime wheel running might become a nuisance.

Bedding

First and foremost — **no cedar or pine!!** Both contain oils called phenols that cause liver and kidney failure, a long term, slow process that will shorten the animal's life. Acceptable beddings include Sani-chips® (heat treated aspen chips), shredded aspen, aspen shavings, Alpha-dri (a paper laboratory product), and CareFRESH™ (a paper product). Gentle Touch™, a pelleted aspen product, is very good at odor control. It can be used as a base for the bedding, followed by a layer of bedding.

Another product to avoid is any of the cotton or fiber type beddings sold as nesting material. Hamsters can get the fibers caught in their pouches or ingest them while eating. The fibers do not break down in the hamster's system. A better alternative is plain white toilet paper.



Toys

In the wild hamsters travel great distances in search of food, so lots of exercise is needed. Be sure to include a wheel in their cage. Hamsters also like a house to hide or burrow in. These come in wood or plastic. Plastic is easier to clean, and wood gives them something to chew on. Small cardboard boxes, toilet paper tubes and paper towel rolls make excellent toys as well.

The word "hamster" derives from the German word "hamstern," meaning to store. This refers to the hamsters tendency to collect food in its pouches.

Food

A good diet for both Syrian and Dwarf Hamsters is lab blocks (also sold as rodent chow or rodent diet). This is a scientifically prepared, balanced diet for rodents that comes in a pelleted form. Hamster mix can be used as a treat given a few times a week. Fruits and vegetables can also be given, though they should be introduced slowly as too much can cause diarrhea. They also enjoy the occasional treat of bread, low sugar breakfast cereal (Cheerios, etc.), and dog biscuits. Their food can be placed in a small crock style dish, but more than likely the hamster will just dump it out onto the cage floor.

Water

Water should be available at all times in a gravity fed water bottle. These are available at any pet store. A dish of water will only get spilled or walked in, getting both hamster and bedding wet. Water bottle holders are also available that come with chew guards and caps to prevent destroyed water bottles.

Handling

Like all animals, hamsters will bite if given sufficient reason, and they are quite capable of drawing blood. Most hamster bites result from the hamster being suddenly startled or grabbed. It is best to handle hamsters very gently, scooping them up and cradling them in the palms of your hands. The more a hamster is handled, the more tame it will become.

When taking a hamster out of its cage, some precautions should be kept in mind. Hamsters can't see very well, and they aren't the most agile or sure-footed creatures. They can easily fall off tables and counters, possibly doing some serious damage or injury to themselves.

Hamsters should never be allowed to run loose on the floor, as they can easily be stepped on, or disappear behind furniture. Hamster balls are an option, but should be used with supervision.



For Additional Information:

Book List

Introduction The Proper Care of Hamsters, by Marianne Mays
Hamsters, A Yearbook, by Anmarie Barrie
A Guide to Owning a Hamster, by Anmarie Barrie
Hamsters as a Hobby, by Greg Ovechka
Guide to Owning a Mouse, by Howard Hirschhorn
Mice, by Horst Bielfeld
A Step-by Step Book About Dwarf Hamsters, by Chris Henwood
The Hamster, A Guide to a Happy Healthy Pet, by Betsy Sikora Siino

Hamsters On The "Net"

California Hamster Association <http://chahamsters.org/>
California Hamster Association (new site)
<https://californiahamsterassociation.com>
The National Hamster Council <https://hamsters-uk.org/>