



# Gerbils

Thinking of adding a gerbil to your family? Gerbils may not be as common a pet rodent as hamsters, but get to know one (or ideally two!), and you will find they are friendly and fascinating animals. Before you bring your new companions home, though, you need to know what to expect from living with gerbils.

Gerbils behave a lot like wild gerbils. And two things are very important to wild gerbils: **security** and **companionship**.

**Security.** Gerbils are a prey species. In the wild, they are always on the lookout for predators – on the ground and in the air. Gerbils thump to warn others about danger. Other gerbils listen in and either thump back in response or flee to safety. They dash into a complex network of underground tunnels and dens that make up the burrow where they live.

As pets, they do the same. To feel secure, your gerbils need to be able to dig – and retreat to – their own system of rooms and passageways.

**Companionship.** Wild gerbils live in large family groups. Together in their underground home, they sleep, play, stash food, eat, raise families and groom each other. Another way they communicate is by scent marking. They have a special gland on their stomach that they rub over things to let other gerbils know they were there. Gerbils also mark each other to create a “family scent.”

## **Pet gerbils are social too!**

Consider adopting more than one gerbil so they can keep each other company when you're not home.



## Gerbil Stats

- Origin: Mongolia
- Status: Began to be kept as pets in the 1960s
- Life Span: Usually two to four years
- Size: Weigh up to 130 g and measure 22 to 30 cm in length (including a fur-covered tail)
- Coat: Short and smooth
- Colour: Many different colours and patterns, like lilac or “Siamese” (darker nose, paws, ears and tail – like a Siamese cat)





# Gerbil Guardian Guide

**Gerbils are energetic pets who require an attentive, consistent guardian. Here are just some of the care and welfare needs of gerbils. The pet care section of the BC SPCA website – [spca.bc.ca](http://spca.bc.ca) – has more detailed gerbil care information.**

## Chow down

Being omnivores, gerbils eat both plant and animal products. Feed your gerbils a staple diet of rodent food (called rodent or lab block). Rodent block is a complete, balanced diet and should be available to them all the time. Provide a small amount of vegetables, fruits, nuts and seeds every day, too. Gerbils crave variety! Be sure to remove any uneaten fresh food the next day so it doesn't spoil and make them sick.



## Snack time

Gerbils love treats! Foods such as unsweetened cereals, plain popcorn and cooked pasta make great snacks. Just don't feed too many or you'll end up with fat, unhealthy gerbils!

## My, what big teeth you have!

To help wear down their ever-growing front teeth, provide your gerbils with chewing items such as cardboard, Timothy hay, wooden toys and apple or aspen branches. Make sure the branches come from trees that haven't been treated with any chemicals.

## Drink up!

Gerbils need water available to them all the time. Fill your gerbils' sipper bottle with clean, fresh water every day. Once a week, clean the bottle using soap and water. Avoid water dishes. Gerbils tend to bury them as they dig, creating a soggy mess.

## Gazillions of gerbils

Never keep male and female gerbils together, even for a short period. Gerbils multiply at an amazing rate. Females can have up to 12 litters in just one year, with anywhere from one to eight young per litter.

## Gerbil gymnasium

Gerbils are active animals requiring a large habitat. Each gerbil needs at least one square foot of space to himself. The more space, the better! Gerbils are burrowers so a deep enclosure with a solid bottom is best. A 20 gallon aquarium with a wire mesh lid works well for a pair of gerbils. Aquariums are secure and can easily be filled with burrowing material.

## Gerbil jungle gym

Gerbils require daily exercise and will happily explore a playpen made just for them. A wading pool or a bathtub (drain closed!) lined with a towel works well. Fill with safe objects to climb on, over and through to keep your gerbils busy and interested. Paper bags, cereal boxes, paper cups, toilet paper rolls and untreated wood are good choices. Always supervise playtime.

## Healthy, happy gerbils

Spending time with your gerbils will show you how they normally look and behave. When you notice something unusual – like diarrhea or loss of appetite – you'll know to take them to the veterinarian right away!

## Interior decorating

Adding small houses, hanging toys, ramps, tunnels, tubes and a solid (not wire) exercise wheel provides stimulation and places to hide and sleep. Swap items in and out to keep your gerbils' cage interesting. Scatter or hang nesting material – like toilet paper – for your gerbils to gather.



## A clean, comfy home

For bedding, use wood shavings such as aspen, shredded paper or CareFRESH® (bedding made from recycled paper). Do not use cedar or pine shavings because they can cause health problems. Provide a deep layer of bedding to allow your gerbils to burrow. Clean the entire cage every two weeks. Gerbils are not known for being smelly. As desert animals, they produce dry feces and very little urine. Keep the cage in an area protected from cold drafts and direct sunlight, as well as bright lights and loud noises.

## Hands off tails!

Never pick a gerbil up by his tail. Part of his tail could actually fall off – ouch! Broken tails don't grow back.

## Handle with care

You can pick up your gerbils by putting cupped hands near them and letting them crawl into your hands. Be careful not to squeeze! Hold your gerbils while sitting on the floor. Not all gerbils enjoy being held and they may try to leap from your hands.

## Spa treatment

Gerbils are great groomers. They spend lots of time each day carefully cleaning themselves – and each other – all over. Should you notice your gerbils' coats looking a little greasy, provide them with a dust bath – a glass jar tilted on its side with a shallow layer (two to three tablespoons) of chinchilla dust. Leave the bath in their cage for about half an hour before taking it out.



DENNIE COOY/GETTY IMAGES



# Keep the cardboard coming!

**Gerbils love to chew, and cardboard is a particular favourite.** Drink holders, egg cartons, toilet paper rolls and tissue boxes all make great gerbil toys. Plus, they are easy to find and free. Give your gerbils cardboard on a daily basis and watch how quickly they dismantle each piece!



## Aquariums get an “A”

Aquariums are great homes for gerbils for so many reasons. You can fill them up with lots of bedding and watch your gerbils get busy creating tunnels and racing through them. Unlike wire cages, aquariums keep the bedding from flying all over the place as gerbils dig. And, unlike plastic cages, aquariums can't be chewed through!

Aquariums can be quite expensive. The good news is you don't need a brand new one to create a cozy, interesting home for your gerbils. A used aquarium will do – and costs a lot less. It doesn't need to hold water so leaks don't matter! You can look through newspaper and online ads, or check out garage sales for used tanks.

## Expand your gerbil “gnaw-ledge”!

This booklet provides basic care information. Please visit [spca.bc.ca/animalcare](http://spca.bc.ca/animalcare) for more detailed information on gerbil care. You can also dig a little deeper with these other great gerbil resources:

### **Gerbils: The Complete Guide to Gerbil Care**

By Donna Anastasi  
Published by BowTie Press

### **The Gerbil: An Owner's Guide to a Happy Healthy Pet**

By Betsy Sikora Siino  
Published by Howell Book House

### **The American Gerbil Society**

[agsgerbils.org](http://agsgerbils.org)

**e-Gerbil**  
[egerbil.com](http://egerbil.com)

## The gerbil guardian pledge

As their guardian, you are responsible for your gerbils' health and well-being.

You should make sure:

1. They never go hungry or thirsty;
2. They are taken to the vet when they are sick or injured;
3. They are not afraid all the time;
4. They are comfortable in their surroundings;
5. They are free to behave like gerbils!

For more information on providing these “Five Freedoms,” check out [spca.bc.ca/animalcare](http://spca.bc.ca/animalcare).





# Construction Zone

## Gerbils On The Job!

Meet **SpongeBob** & **Patrick**, two resident gerbils adopted from the SPCA Surrey shelter by the staff that put together Bark! The brothers are approximately two years old and love renovating their gerbil terrarium.

In their native desert habitat, gerbils live in groups in underground burrows - consisting of tunnels and separate dens for living, food storage, eating, resting, and washroom activities. Gerbil burrows also have several entrances to escape predators.

These energetic rodents have evolved to be diggers, scratchers and gnawers. They are fun to watch, because they are always tunnelling in their habitat - it changes daily!

You can make a habitat for that closely matches their

Build Your Own - This is what you'll need:

» **Aquarium** - for two gerbils, a 10 gallon tank is sufficient  
(Hint: ask your parents to help you look for a used one at a garage sale, or in newspaper or online classifieds.)

» **CareFRESH shavings** (or aspen shavings or a combination of the two)

» **Timothy Hay**

» **3 or 4 small food dishes**

» **Paper towel and toilet paper rolls**

» **Cardboard** (egg cartons and paper cup holders work well)



## 36 HOURS WITH SPONGEBOB & PATRICK. CHECK OUT H



TUESDAY 3:00PM ©

**MEN  
AT  
WORK**

**Clean house!** Clean the cage out once a month. Gerbils are desert animals which produce very little pee and their poop is very dry. They have almost no odour.



WEDNESDAY 6:15PM

**Where'd dinner go?** Extra food dishes come in handy. As gerbils dig, their excavations tend to bury their food dishes! Don't worry, your gerbils will still be able to dig to the food. They have a keen sense of smell.

## What's that thumping?

If you listen carefully, groups of gerbils or bonded pairs will communicate with each other by thumping their hind legs. This warning signal will cause your gerbils to flee into a hiding spot or thump in response.



## your pet gerbils wild environment



- » **Water bottle** and some pipe cleaners & zap strap (to help hang it)
- » **Huts and dens** (you can make yourself or buy from your pet supply store)
- » **Shredded paper**
- » **A fitted wire top** (so your gerbils don't escape)

Just layer the CareFRESH shavings with paper tubes, huts & dens, shredded paper, and hay. Put a food bowl in and hang a water bottle from the top. That's it! Watch your gerbils explore their new home and begin turning it into a construction zone.



## One or two?

It is best to try to get pairs of gerbils - preferably siblings. If you introduce adult gerbils that haven't grown up together they will most likely fight and hurt each other.

Gerbils have **powerful** front and hind legs. They **dig** with their shorter front legs, then **kick out** the substrate with their hind legs.



## HOW BUSY THESE BROTHERS ARE!



**Fresh H<sub>2</sub>O:** Check that the tip of the bottle is not clogged or buried. Change the water once a week.

## Can I pick them up?

If gerbils are gently handled when young, they can be picked up. Most gerbils are shy and skittish, so you have to be patient and move slowly around them.



## BCSPCA FIRST!

Ready to bring gerbils into your family? Don't forget to make BC SPCA shelters your First Adoption Option! Shelters are often overwhelmed with small critters like gerbils, hamsters, rats, mice, and guinea pigs.

You need more information than is printed here to take good care of gerbils. Visit our animal care section at [www.sPCA.bc.ca/kids](http://www.sPCA.bc.ca/kids) for recommended care books and web resources.







## Don't forget the FIVE FREEDOMS!

Take a moment to think about the Five Freedoms before you make a purchase:

1. Freedom from hunger and thirst
2. Freedom from pain, injury and disease
3. Freedom from distress
4. Freedom from discomfort
5. Freedom to express behaviours that promote well-being

Ask yourself questions like: Could this product **hurt** my pet or make him **uncomfortable** in any way? Does this product allow my pet to express herself, or will it just make her **nervous**?

If you're at all unsure, **skip it!** You might need to do more research to make sure it's right for your furry friend.

# LET'S GO SHOPPING!

## Your guide to buying small animal supplies



### STAY AWAY!

#### Yogurt drops

These sweet treats have way more sugar than small animals need!



For a healthier snack, try small pieces of banana instead.

#### Wire wheels

Tails and toes can easily get caught between the rungs. Ouch!



Stick with wheels that have solid surfaces – like ones made of plastic. They're safer and more comfortable.

#### Cotton fluff

Hamsters, rats, mice and gerbils love to make nests. But cotton fluff has small threads that can wrap around and seriously injure their legs and feet.



Toilet paper and strips of newspaper are a safer option for nesting materials.

#### Pine and cedar shavings

Pine and cedar smell nice to us, but they can cause breathing issues in small animals.



Recycled paper bedding and aspen shavings are good alternatives.



#### Exercise balls

Not all hamsters enjoy running around in a ball. Plus, it's easy for them to get stuck in a corner and forgotten – or accidentally kicked!



A better choice? Set up an exercise area where small animals can roam around freely and safely.





## BE CAREFUL!

### Chew toys

Small animals can enjoy gnawing on toys made from a variety of materials such as wood and dried hay. But remember: any toy can become dangerous when too much of it gets eaten or it falls apart!

Be sure to check toys for damage, and throw them out when they're no longer safe.

Cardboard – like toilet paper and paper towel rolls – makes a great, safe (and free!) chew item for small animals.



### Seed mixes

Rats, mice, gerbils and hamsters are huge seed fans. But feed them too many and they'll end up fat and unhealthy! High quality pellets should make up most of their diet.



Seeds can be given in small amounts as treats.



## GO FOR IT!

### Treat balls

Rats, guinea pigs and rabbits can quickly learn to roll these balls around and gobble up the food that falls out. This keeps their minds and bodies active!



### Exercise pens

Exercise pens made just for small animals have narrow bars to prevent escape (or no bars at all!). Fill a pen with lots of objects for them to crawl over, under and through. This lets them safely explore the world outside their cage. They'll still need supervision, of course.



## Know before you go

When shopping for small animal supplies, keep these two things in mind:

1. Just because a store sells a product doesn't mean that product is safe for animals.

Sadly, some products are downright dangerous for our pets. That's why it's important to do your research first. Talk to people who have the same type of pet as you. Read product reviews online to learn about potential safety concerns.

2. Products are marketed to people, not pets.

After all, we're the ones buying them! We're often drawn to a product because the label catches our eye or we like the colours it comes in. But just because we want it doesn't mean our pets need it.