

# 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.



## Buddy up!

Gerbils should not be kept alone. Two can live together provided they are the same sex and have a large enough living space. For all those hours people are at work or school (or asleep), think how happy your gerbil will be having a gerbil friend! They'll eat, play and sleep together, and groom each other. To help prevent squabbles, gerbils kept in pairs should come from the same litter or be introduced to each other when they are very young.

## 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.



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## 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.

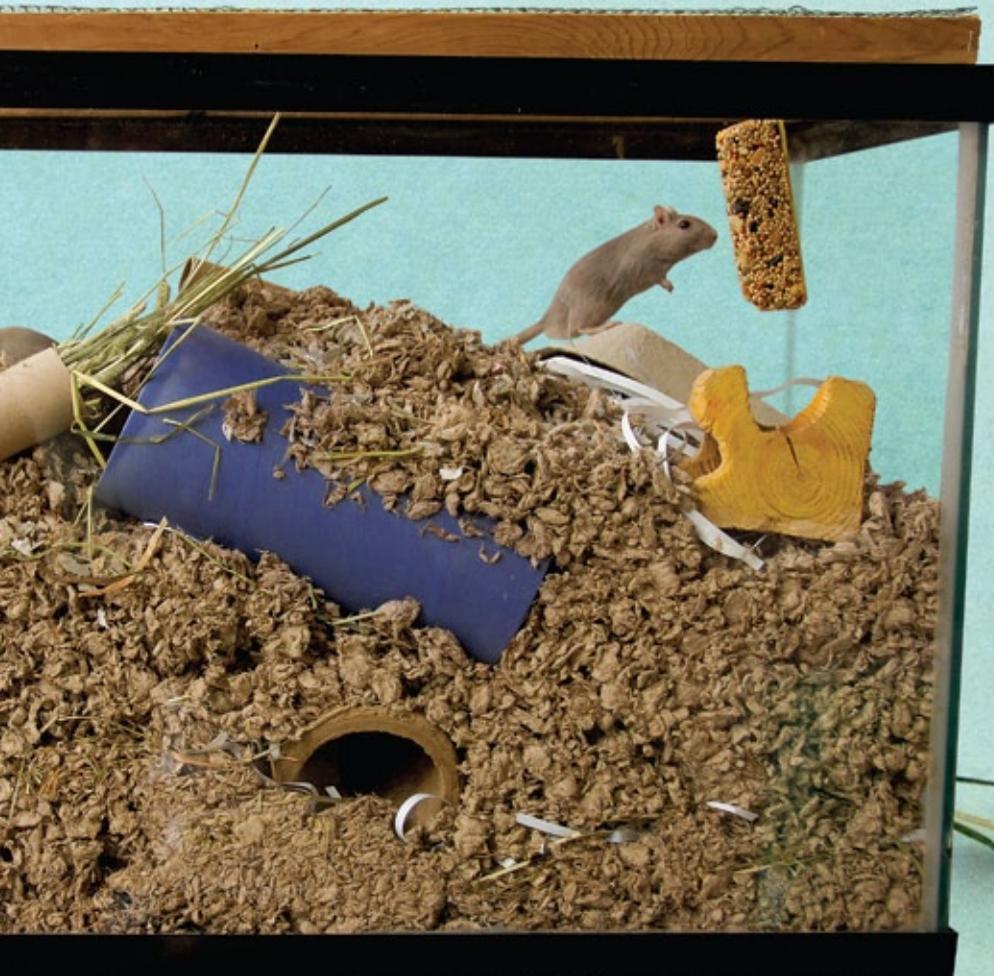
## Handle with care

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.



# 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).

