



# Hamsters

In the wild, hamsters live in underground burrows where they sleep, stash food, raise families and hide from predators. They are most active at night, travelling long distances to gather foods such as seeds and insects in their stretchy cheek pouches.

Though there are many types of hamsters in the wild, only five species are commonly kept as pets. There's the popular **Syrian**, and the less common dwarf hamsters: the **Campbell's Russian**, **winter white Russian**, **Roborovski** and **Chinese**. These small Asian rodents have only been around as companion animals for less than a century.

Roborovski hamster



Syrian hamster



**Syrian hamsters** are the largest and easiest to handle of all the pet hamsters. Though they can be jumpy as youngsters, most mature into calm and patient pets. Syrians come in a variety of colours and patterns such as dark chocolate brown and tortoiseshell. They can also have different hair styles, including short, long and curly. Syrian hamsters are solitary and should be housed alone. They usually live for about two years.

**Dwarf hamsters** are small and fast moving, and can be difficult to handle. They have not been kept as pets for as long as Syrians, and are not found in as many colours, patterns and hair styles.

Dwarf hamsters are social and should be housed in same-sexed pairs or small groups. They also have a lifespan of about two years.

Syrian hamster



## What's in a name?

Over the years, hamsters – especially Syrians – have earned a number of nicknames. There are teddy bears (longhaired Syrians), black bears (black-coated Syrians), panda bears (black-and-white Syrians) and Hershey bears (chocolate-coloured Syrians), just to name a few.

When adding a hamster to your family, choose one who suits your personality and lifestyle – regardless of name!

# Hamster-rific

Hamsters are engaging pets, requiring patient, attentive care. Here are just some of the care and welfare needs of hamsters. The pet care

section of the BC SPCA website – [spca.bc.ca](http://spca.bc.ca) – has more hamster care tips.



dwarf hamsters

## Single or social?

Syrian hamsters like living on their own and should be housed by themselves. Otherwise they will fight.

Dwarf hamsters are social. Two or more can live together provided they are the same sex and have a large habitat. To help prevent squabbles, dwarf hamsters kept in pairs or small groups should come from the same litter or be introduced to each other when they are very young.

## When's your bedtime?

Hamsters are nocturnal. They like to be active at night and asleep during the day. So your hamster may be just getting up when you're heading for bed. You need to be able to stay up late enough to care for him. Disturbing your hamster during the day may cause him to get upset and bite.



## Chow down

Being omnivores, hamsters eat both plant and animal foods. Feed your hamster a

staple diet of hamster pellets or blocks. Hamster pellets are a complete, balanced diet and should be available to her all the time. Provide a small amount of vegetables, fruits, nuts and seeds every day, too. Hamsters crave variety!

## Snacks

Hamsters love treats! Foods such as plain popcorn, scrambled egg and cooked pasta make great snacks. Just don't feed him too many or you'll end up with a fat, unhealthy hamster.

## Working out

Hamsters 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 hamster busy and interested. Paper bags, cereal boxes, paper cups, toilet paper rolls and untreated wood are good choices. Always supervise playtime.

## Drink up!

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



PHOTO: JORDAN BRUCE

## 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 hamster to burrow. Clean toilet areas every other day and the entire cage once a week. Keep the cage in an area protected from cold drafts and direct sunlight, as well as loud noises and bright lights.



# Guardian Guide



## Hundreds of hamsters

Never keep male and female hamsters together, even for a short period. Hamsters multiply at an amazing rate. Females can have up to 10 litters in just one year, with anywhere from four to 12 young per litter.

## My, what big teeth you have!

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

## Handle with care

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



## Healthy, happy hamsters

Spending time with your hamster will show you how she normally looks and behaves. When you notice something unusual – like diarrhea or reluctance to move – you'll know to take her to the veterinarian right away!



Check out those cheeks!

## Interior decorating

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



## Hoarders

Hamsters hoard their food, so be sure to look for hidden stashes. Take away any uneaten fresh food the next day so it doesn't spoil and make her sick.

## Toilet training

Most hamsters will use one corner or area as a toilet area. You can buy a hamster-sized litter box at a pet supply store, or use an appropriately sized glass jar turned on its side. Place some soiled bedding in the litter box to encourage your hamster to use it.

## Hamster haven

Hamsters are active animals requiring a large habitat. The more space, the better! Hamsters like to burrow so a deep enclosure with a solid bottom is best. A 40 gallon aquarium with a wire mesh lid works well for a single Syrian or a pair of dwarf hamsters. Aquariums are secure and can easily be filled with burrowing material. Other options include do-it-yourself cages made from large, clear plastic storage bins or glass IKEA® cabinets (pictured here).

## On the loose!

TRGOWANLOCK/ISTOCK

Hamsters are excellent escape artists! And, once they're out, they usually don't return to their cage on their own. So, should your hamster run away, try setting up a hamster trap to catch him.

### You will need:

- ✓ A bucket
- ✓ A ramp (a piece of wood or a staircase made of books)
- ✓ Two towels
- ✓ Your hamster's favourite treat

### What to do:

- 1 Lean the ramp against the bucket. Wrap the ramp in a towel to help provide grip.
- 2 Place treats leading up to the top.
- 3 Line the bucket with another towel – just not too close to the top or else your hamster will climb out.
- 4 Put some more treats in the bucket.
- 5 Leave the trap overnight.

Likely, your hungry hamster will follow the trail of treats up the ramp, and then drop into the bucket to hoard more food. In the morning, he will be waiting for you!

To help prevent escapes, remember to regularly check your hamster's cage for any weak spots or holes. Hamsters have strong teeth and can gnaw through wood, plastic and even soft metals. Make sure any lids are secure, doors are latched and tubes are tightly connected.



### Do your hammy homework!

This booklet provides basic care information. Please visit [spca.bc.ca/petcare](http://spca.bc.ca/petcare) for more hamster care tips. You can also expand your "gnaw-ledge" with these other great hamster resources:

#### Hamster: A Practical Guide to Caring for Your Hamster

By Mark Evans

Published by DK Publishing, Inc.

#### Hamster: Your Happy Healthy Pet

By Betsy Sikora Siino

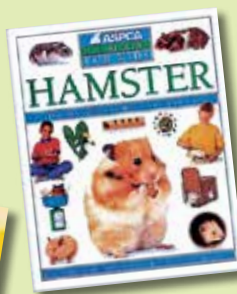
Published by Wiley Publishing, Inc.

#### California Hamster Association

[californiahamsterassociation.com](http://californiahamsterassociation.com)

#### Hamsterific

[hamsterific.com](http://hamsterific.com)



### The hamster guardian pledge

As their guardian, you are responsible for your hamsters' 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 hamsters!

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

Make the BCSPCA your first adoption option! Visit [spca.bc.ca](http://spca.bc.ca) to view all adoptable hamsters.