

Caring for your **Gerbil**

Did you know that in the wild, gerbils live in the desert? Gerbils are also fun pets, but taking care of them is a big job! Find out what supplies you'll need and what responsibilities you'll have in taking care of your new pet gerbil.

Note: it is illegal to own a gerbil in California or Hawaii, because if they escape they can establish wild colonies and damage the ecosystem.

Supplies Needed

- Aquariums are better than cages because cages might have bars that their feet can get caught in and break. A well-ventilated aquarium with a top that seals so your gerbil can't push up on it and escape is best.
- Line the aquarium/cage with shredded paper (newspaper or paper towels) or recycled paper bedding (no shavings of any kind), with a mound in a corner – gerbils love to burrow!
- Gerbil/rodent pellets
- A wheel that is smooth-sided to prevent its feet or tail from getting caught and broken
- A water bottle that attaches to the side of the aquarium
- A tip-proof (weighted) bowl for food
- A safe wooden chew toy made specifically for gerbils
- Exercise ball

Dangerous Foods

- Salt
- High-sodium food
- High-sugar food
- High-carbohydrate food
- Nicotine
- Soil
- House plants
- Leaves or grass from your yard
- Food off your plate
- Do not add vitamins to their water
- Avoid too much dried fruit (it can lead to intestinal issues)
- Too much fruit or vegetables can lead to diarrhea in gerbils (water in, water out...)
- Yogurt drops and other advertised "treats" actually aren't appropriate



Chores

Daily

- Feed your gerbil a pellet diet as directed by the label
Note: a seed and nut diet is not a complete diet; only a pellet diet is complete.
- Supplement the diet with fresh vegetables such as leafy greens, lettuce, spinach or carrots (avoid high sugar fruit)
- Clean up leftovers before they spoil
- Be sure their water bottle is filled with fresh water
- Scoop up soiled bedding each day
- **IMPORTANT NOTE:** Gerbils have high metabolisms and can become hypoglycemic if they do not eat every day. If your gerbil appears lethargic or isn't eating well, go to your veterinarian immediately.

Weekly

- Completely clean the aquarium/cage once a week with hot, soapy water.

Yearly

- Take your gerbil to your veterinarian at least once a year, though twice a year is preferable because their life spans aren't very long. Your veterinarian can also cut their nails at that time for you if you aren't comfortable doing it.

Tip: Let your child know that gerbils may only live for a few years so that they aren't overly shocked when their pet dies.



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The Right Temperature

Gerbils thrive at room temperature, normally whatever is comfortable to humans. Gerbils are prone to overheating, so in a home without air conditioning, at least have fans blowing to circulate the air. If it's extremely hot, surround the aquarium/cage with ice packs (or purchase a temperature-controlled one).

How to Hold Your Gerbil

It is very important that you never hold your gerbil by its tail, as it will break off. Gerbils can bite, so be careful to not surprise them – approach slowly and let them hear you coming. Cup them in the palm of your hand. The more you hold them, the more comfortable they will be with being held. Be sure to wash your hands after handling.

**Gerbils aren't appropriate for small children because they can carry diseases like ringworm, and will bite if handled roughly.*

More Than One Gerbil?

Gerbils are social in the wild. Since it can be dangerous to spay or neuter them because of their small size, select same sex gerbils and purchase them at the same time – introducing a new gerbil to one who has already become accustomed to their home will create problems. Females tend to be less aggressive than males. Note: the more animals that share an aquarium/cage, the more frequently it will need to be cleaned.

Don't Let a Loose Gerbil Out of Your Sight

Gerbils are fast and small — you don't want to lose them in your house! Be sure if you remove them from their aquarium/cage that it is in a secure room or an exercise ball and never leave him/her alone.

Finding the Right Veterinarian

- A veterinarian that treats "exotic pets" will be more comfortable with gerbils
- When you first get your pet, have your parent or guardian take it to a veterinarian for a check-up
- Your pet should see a veterinarian at least once a year and when you think it might be sick

Information on caring for your pet gerbil provided by Laurie Hess, DVM, Diplomate ABVP (Avian), owner of Veterinary Center for Birds and Exotics in Bedford Hills, N.Y.