

# Syrian Hamsters (Golden, Teddy Bear, Fancy, Black Bear, Panda Bear)

Genus *Cricetulus*



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**LIFE SPAN:** 2-4 years

**AVERAGE SIZE:** 3-4 inches

**CAGE TEMPS:** normal room temperature; not affected by normal house temperature ranges

**WILD HISTORY:** Syrian hamsters are hardy creatures that come from the semi-desert region of Syria.

All Syrian hamsters that are pets in the United States are captive bred.

All Syrian hamsters living in captivity today are descendants of a single female and her twelve babies, captured in Syria in 1930.

The name 'hamster' comes from the German word for 'hoard,' a reference to their habit of storing huge amounts of food in their cheek pouches. This enables them to carry food back to their nest from far and wide. In its natural environment, a single hamster can stash up to 240 pounds of saved food in its burrow.

**PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS:** Hamsters are stout, round-bodied rodents with small dark eyes and tiny, stubby tails. They have small, bare paws with small claws. Hamsters have internal cheek pouches, which extend from their mouth to nearly as far back as their hind legs.

**NORMAL BEHAVIOR & INTERACTION:** Very social & engaging – generally very gregarious. Syrian hamsters are best kept alone. If caged with another, they will fight to the point of injury and sometimes death. When you purchase your Syrian hamster at the pet store, it will most likely be caged in a group. This is because these hamsters are young, and not quite to the mature point, but soon will be.

Hamsters are easily tamed, even if they are difficult at first. The more you handle and work with your pet, the tamer it will become. A hamster will bite in defense if it feels threatened. Remember to work with your pet after dusk, as it will be more willing to cooperate since it is a nocturnal animal.

Place your pet's cage in a place in the home where it will be around the family, yet protected from direct light, drafts and excess noise during the day. Also be sure it is high enough to be out of reach of dog noses and small children's hands.

Hamsters are prey animals and can feel threatened by large bodies hovering above them or in their faces.

Like many rodents, hamsters have cheek pouches, which in the wild allow them to hoard and transport food. Although their food is readily available to them in captivity, many hamsters still instinctively pack their food into their pouches and run frantically around their cage to find a hiding place.

**FEEDING:** Vegetarians / grain eaters – will eat an occasional insect such as crickets or mealworms

Commercially prepared hamster/gerbil diets are available at all pet stores, they are made of pellets, seeds, grains and dried vegetables; a good food should contain about 12% protein and 6-8% fat.

Replenish the food in your hamster's cage when most of it is gone; they will eventually eat the pieces they desire less.

Hamsters are notorious for food hoarding. They will take food to various places in the cage for storage, bury it and often forget about it. For this reason it is important to spot clean your hamster's cage daily to remove fresh foods that may become spoiled. Seeds and pellets can remain in their hiding spots.

**FRESH FOODS:** Healthy, fresh fruits, vegetables and grains can also be fed to your hamster. Offer these treats in small amounts, as they may cause diarrhea if fed in too great an amount.

**\*\* Please avoid feeding sugary treats such as yogurt drops or honey sticks to your hamster. These treats contain far too much sugar and can cause several health issues such as diabetes.**

**SUPPLEMENTS:** If fed a balanced diet, supplements are not necessary for your hamster.

**WATER:** Clean, fresh chlorine-free water must always be available. Change it daily. All water given must be 100% free of chlorine and heavy metals. (Not all home water filtration systems remove 100% of the chlorine and heavy metals from tap water). We recommend that you use unflavored bottled drinking water or bottled natural spring water; never use untreated tap water. If tap water is used, you should treat it with a de-chlorinating treatment. De-chlorinator is available in the fish department. If you do not want to chemically de-chlorinate the water, you can leave an open container of tap water out for at least 24 hours. Do not use distilled water, which can cause severe medical problems, since it lacks minerals that are essential to important body functions.

### **RECOMMENDED SUPPLIES:**

10 gallon sized glass cage with locking top, or similarly sized plastic hamster cage.	Hamster wheel with solid running surface. Non-solid surfaces can cause injury.
Several toys	Pelleted, timothy based commercial hamster food & timothy hay
One or two hide houses	Shredded aspen bedding, "Carefresh", or newspaper for the bottom of the tank
Water bottle	Hamster book

**HOUSING & ENVIRONMENT:** Many different types of hamster cages are available at the pet store. Do not buy the smallest cages thinking that because the pet is small, it does not need much room. Hamsters love to run and explore. A larger cage will allow it to create several "rooms" as hamsters will do. They like to have separate bedrooms, food storage areas and play areas.

A ten gallon glass tank is an excellent sized cage for one Syrian hamster.

These cages will allow you to choose different toys and hiding places that can be interchanged within the cage. Choose several hiding places, a solid walled plastic wheel and chew toys. Small cardboard boxes will also be appreciated. When designing your cage set-up, be sure to include a mesh wire top for the cage that can be secured snugly with cage "locks". Hamsters are escape artists and WILL find a way to escape if it is possible.

The plastic cages with tube accessories are also excellent cages that all hamster types usually enjoy. Your hamster will undoubtedly chew on parts of this type of cage, so monitor the cage daily so your pet does not chew an escape hole.

**HIDE HOUSE:** The hide house is extremely important to the hamster, and will most likely become your pet's main 'bedroom'. Hamsters will not often relieve themselves inside the hide house or 'nest', so it is not necessary to disturb the nest to clean it daily. Cleaning of the hide house can be done during the more intensive bi-weekly cleaning.

**WATER BOTTLE:** A full water bottle must be available at all times; refill it daily. Be sure to clean out the inside of the bottle thoroughly during the more intensive cage cleaning sessions every week. Water bottles will often become slimy inside, which will in turn harbor harmful bacteria. Clean the bottle thoroughly with a mild bleach solution (1 bleach:32 water). Be sure to rinse the bottle extremely well after the cleaning to ensure no bleach is left behind!

Your pet will most likely chew a bottle inside the cage, so be sure to attach the bottle to the OUTSIDE of the cage. Check the straw daily for any blockages to make sure your pet always has access to the fresh water. If you cannot place the bottle on the outside of the cage, purchase a metal water bottle guard. This will keep him or her from getting to the bottle.

**BEDDING:** We recommend an aspen bedding or soft recycled newspaper bedding such as "Carefresh". Neither of these choices will cause allergic reactions or respiratory distress *and* it is easy to clean. **DO NOT use cedar chips, as they contain dangerous phenols, which are toxic to your pet.**

Place enough bedding in the cage so your pet can happily tunnel underneath it.

Spot clean your pet's cage daily by simply removing the soiled portions of bedding.

**TOYS:** Several types of toys must be available to your hamster. Chewing toys such as wooden hamster toys (available at the pet store), hide houses, wheels, "run-abouts" (clear plastic balls for your hamster to run around the house in), cardboard boxes, paper towel tubes and dried untreated fruit tree branches are all excellent toys for your hamster. Hamsters **MUST** chew constantly in order to wear their teeth down, which grow on a continual basis. Therefore, toys that allow the hamster to chew and wear those teeth down are invaluable. Stick to toys bought at the pet store, as these are generally made of pet-safe materials.

**HABITAT MAINTENANCE:** Daily maintenance should consist of spot cleaning by removing soiled substrate, cleaning water bowl thoroughly and wiping glass clean.

The entire cage should be cleaned thoroughly at least once every week with:

- A mild dishwashing liquid in warm water (make a weak dilution),  
THEN
- Vinegar & water (1:8)  
OR bleach and warm water (1:32)
- Cage “furniture” should also be scrubbed clean with the same dilution.
- RINSE OFF ALL SOAP AND BLEACH THOROUGHLY WITH PLAIN WATER BEFORE RE-INTRODUCING YOUR PET TO ITS ENCLOSURE!!
- NEVER MIX VINEGAR AND BLEACH – IT CREATES A TOXIC SOLUTION

**GROOMING & HYGIENE:** It is not necessary to clean or bathe your hamster. They are extremely neat and will groom themselves! If it seems as if your pet has not been grooming him or herself, he may be ill. Contact your exotic pet veterinarian.

**SIGNS OF A HEALTHY ANIMAL:** Healthy hamsters have a rounded, full body and smooth, even fur with no bald patches. The nostrils, under-tail area, under-chin area, ears and eyes should be clear and free of discharge – fur should not be damp or stained in any way. Your pet should have bright eyes; teeth should be even and well aligned with no staining around the chin; breathing should be even and not labored, wheezing or gurgling sounds. Healthy hamsters are very energetic and busy; although there are nocturnal and may be caught napping during the day.

We recommend physical exams every year with an exotic pet veterinarian for small mammals. If your vet sees your pet regularly, many common conditions that afflict your pet can be caught and treated early. If not caught early enough or if left untreated, many of these conditions can become far worse if not fatal.

**SOME COMMON PROBLEMS INCLUDE:**

<b>HEALTH ISSUE:</b>	<b>SYMPTOMS:</b>	<b>TREATMENT:</b>
<b>Bacterial “<i>Lawsonia intracellularis</i>” “Wet tail”</b>	Diarrhea, wet bottom and tail, lethargy, loss of appetite, irritability, dehydration, lack of grooming	See your exotic veterinarian IMMEDIATELY, disease runs its course quickly. Vet will administer sub-q fluids and antibiotics. DO NOT USE OVER-THE-COUNTER MEDICATIONS
<b>Mites</b>	Loss of hair, bare spots on skin or small red sores; scratching	See your exotic veterinarian immediately. Infecting mite must be identified and treated accordingly
<b>Traumatic injury</b>	Obvious open wounds or weeping spots on body, injured limbs	See your exotic veterinarian for treatment. Cuts must be cleaned properly and antibiotics may be necessary
<b>Abscesses</b>	Abscesses can form when wounds become infected and close up, trapping the bacteria inside.	See your exotic veterinarian immediately. The abscess must be drained and antibiotics administered
<b>Ringworm</b>	Circular ring of missing fur, possible lethargy and loss of appetite CAN be transmitted to humans	See your exotic veterinarian immediately for treatment with an anti-fungal