

Responsibility involves providing proper housing, nutrition, grooming and veterinary care

Background

- Gerbils are native to many parts of the world, but the type of gerbil that most people commonly keep as a pet is the Mongolian.
- These busy little rodents generally grow to about four inches in length and come in a variety of colors, although they usually have white fur on their bellies. Their tails are covered with hair, unlike those of mice.
- Gerbils usually live for three to four years. Most are nocturnal, but Mongolians are not. All gerbils are very frisky, and can easily escape from a cage that isn't closed securely. Their eyesight isn't very good, so it's not unusual for them to fall off tables when they are running around loose. Their hearing and sense of smell, however, are both very acute.
- Gerbils seldom bite, but children caring for gerbils should be supervised by an adult and taught proper handling techniques.

Housing

- Gerbils should be kept in a wire cage or a 10-gallon aquarium that has a wire mesh top. The enclosure should be placed away from direct sunlight or drafts, and lined with an absorbent bedding or some other form of litter. Timothy hay and aspen shavings are good choices, but avoid using pine or cedar wood shavings—the fumes from these products may be harmful to the animal. Also make sure that you change the litter often enough to keep it dry and odor-free.
- Gerbils like to play, so be sure to provide them with an exercise wheel that does not have any openings in which their tails can get caught. Toys will be much appreciated by your gerbil, but avoid anything made of soft plastic or cardboard—it will almost certainly be chewed to bits! Gerbils also like to hide and sleep inside enclosed spaces, so it's a good idea to place a small box for this purpose inside their cage.

- Gerbils also love to dig, so provide yours with plenty of extra bedding, hay or shredded paper towels. Tunneling's fun for your pets, too, so be sure yours have cardboard tubes from paper towels and toilet paper. Larger, sturdier tubes—those made from PVC, for example—will also serve this purpose.

Diet

- Gerbil food contains pellets, grains and seeds, and is available at many pet supply stores. If you offer your pets a mix that includes sunflower seeds, you may notice them picking out these tasty treats first and leaving the high-protein, ultra-nutritious seeds for later. Don't worry—they'll eventually eat the good stuff, so please resist the urge to offer more sunflower seeds, which are high in fat. Too many of these "treats" can lead to obesity.
- You should also supplement your pets' diet by providing small bits of fresh foods and vegetables, including apples, carrots and cucumbers. Don't forget to clean up any leftover fresh food before it spoils.
- Fresh, clean water should be available at all times. It is best to use an inverted bottle with a drinking tube. Change the water daily.

General Care

- Gerbils' teeth grow continuously, just like those of all other rodents. So it is important that they be given either a sterilized bone to gnaw on, or a twig that has not been treated with pesticides, other chemicals or paints. Doing this will help them to keep their teeth from growing too long and sharp.
- Gerbils are very social animals, so it's a good idea to keep at least two. If possible, try to get littermates. However, because gerbils multiply rapidly, keeping males and females together is not recommended.

- Never try to pick up a gerbil by the tail. Instead, scoop the body up gently from behind.
- When you've successfully hand-tamed your pets, you can allow them to run around outside of their cage for a supervised period of time each day. However, be sure to keep them in one room that has been checked carefully for any places from which they can escape, get lost or possibly end up hurt.
- A gerbil who is ill should be seen by a veterinarian as soon as possible.

WHERE CAN YOU FIND A GERBIL?

The ASPCA recommends getting yours from a responsible breeder or adopting one from a shelter or small-animal rescue group. Call your local shelter and search on sites like www.petfinder.com for gerbils in need of loving homes.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- In case of accidental poisoning, call the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center (ASPCA/APCC) 24-Hour Emergency Hotline Numbers: (888) 4ANI-HELP (426-4435) (\$50 per case; Visa, MasterCard, Discover or American Express when you call.)



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