

# GINGER'S GUIDE

## How to Care for Syrian Hamsters



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# Overview

Syrian hamsters, sometimes called “teddy bear hamsters” or “golden hamsters,” are a common small animal found in almost all pet stores. Despite being a staple childhood pet, it can be hard to find a complete care guide for hamsters that contains accurate and comprehensive care instructions. This guide attempts to provide a majority of the necessary information for Syrian hamster care in one place for new hamster owners and current hamster owners looking to learn more. If you’re a minor, show this to your parents to make sure they’re well informed as well.

For those unfamiliar with small animal care, some of the requirements below may seem frivolous or unnecessary but are the current standard for care among ethical hamster breeders and exotic/pocket pet veterinarians who have ample experience and expertise in hamster care and a keen eye for health and behavioral problems. These minimum requirements are not suggestions that can be negotiated as they are the barest of bare minimum standards in what a Syrian hamster needs.

If the information here conflicts with what you’ve been told at the pet store, please refer to the information in this guide instead. Pet store employees are not officially trained in how to care for many of the pets they sell or provide supplies for and are often told to push items or products that can be extremely harmful for hamsters, such as certain store-sponsored cages or accessories.

These guidelines help keep a pet Syrian hamster happy and stress-free, which results in a pet that is less likely to bite, more likely to enjoy being around you and interacting with you, and live a longer, healthier life.

## **Quick Start Setup**

Using a term I've borrowed from video games, I've composed a "quick start" setup for those that aren't sure where to start or are easily overwhelmed by new information and an abundance of choices.

The setup below meets the basic requirements for a happy, healthy hamster environment and requires the least amount of "do it yourself," or DIY, work. All items below should be available at your local pet store.

- 40 Gallon Breeder Tank
- 12-inch Kaytee Silent Spinner
- Kaytee Forti-Diet Pro Health Mouse, Rat and Hamster Food
- Higgin's Sunburst Hamster Mix
- Water Bottle with Tank Attachment and/or Water Bowl
- Wooden Bendy Bridges
- Non-Scented Paper Bedding

# Habitat

## Cage

Syrian hamsters need a lot of space to simulate the multitude of miles they'd run in search of food in the fields of their native home of Syria. The absolute minimum is 600 square inches of uninterrupted floor space, meaning that you cannot link up several smaller cages to achieve this. If your hamster frequently attempts to escape the cage or looks like they're trying to climb the walls often, it's a sign that they need even more space. Some female hamsters may need up to 1000 square inches or more of floor space to satisfy their urge to explore and to collect food and material.

Note: Different countries may have different minimum cage size requirements. For example, in the United Kingdom, the minimum cage size is 4000 sq cm (620 sq in) and in Germany, the minimum cage size is 5000 sq cm (775 sq in).

Because most cages marketed towards hamsters don't achieve this space, owners either have to purchase large fish tanks or reptile terrariums or make their own.

Recommended cages:

- Prevue 528 (608 sq in)
- 40 Gallon Breeder Tank (648 sq in)
- 75 Gallon Tank (864 sq in)
- Ikea Detolf (950 sq in)
- Ikea Samla Bin
- 50 Gallon Sterilite Stacker DIY Bin Cage (≈600 sq in)
- Iris Tree Bin

Don't place your hamster's cage in front of any windows and avoid placing them anywhere with a draft to keep the temperature around their cage constant to avoid overheating or hypothermia.

**Important!** Syrian hamsters must be housed alone. They are solitary creatures with known territorial behaviors that result in lethal fights between hamsters when housed together. The only exception is for mother hamsters and their pups, and even then, it is only until their territorial instincts develop.

## **Furnishing**

Habitats should provide plenty of places for the hamster to hide, burrow under and chew. Hamsters feel more comfortable and safe in an area where they can easily hide, and other furnishings provide stimulation and the ability to explore and play. Hides are meant to let them *hide*, so it's better to avoid see-through or translucent hides and houses.

Recommended furnishings:

- Bendy bridges
- Houses
- Wide tunnels (not toilet or paper towel rolls)
- Popsicle stick constructs
- Natural cork bark rounds and flats, cleaned and sterilized
- Ovo tubes
- Appropriately sized PVC and ABS tubing

## **Chews**

Items to chew on provide a great source of stimulation and entertainment, as it engages in a hamster's natural instinct to chew.

Provide hamsters with chews such as:

- Toilet paper rolls
- Whimzee dog chews
- Hanging treats
- Shelled nuts

Note: A hamster that is chewing on bars cannot be dissuaded from chewing on bars by providing more chews since bar biting is a behavior born from stress and

boredom. To stop bar biting, you must solve the underlying problem, such as a cage being too small or not having enough stimulation.

## **Wheel**

Hamsters love their wheels, but they especially love properly sized ones. Six-inch wheels are too small for all Syrian hamsters, and it is better to provide a larger wheel for the hamster to grow into than a smaller wheel to grow out of. Small wheels cause hamsters to run with their back curved, which causes spinal issues and pain.

Syrians hamsters should have a 10 to 12-inch wheel. The metric of which size you should use is if your hamster is able to run with their back straight as some hamsters can be smaller or larger than average.

Recommended wheels:

- 10.5" Carolina Storm Wheel
- 11" Wodent wheel
- 11" Treadmill Wheel
- 12" Silent Runner Wheel
- DIY Bucket Wheel

**Important!** Wire wheels should never be used under any circumstance as they cause a condition called bumblefoot, which is caused by the wheel causing mini lacerations on the foot pads where bacteria can enter and cause the infection and inflammation. Untreated infections can result in necrosis, limb amputation, and even death. As well, a foot can get caught between the wires and hurt or break their legs. Fur can get caught in any part of it and get pulled off, taking skin with it.

## **Bedding**

Along with space to run, hamsters need to simulate digging and tunneling on their own to satisfy their urge to burrow underground. Plastic tubes cannot be used to substitute natural burrowing. You need at least 4 to 6 inches of bedding. Don't worry if you see your hamster push most of their bedding to one corner,



leaving other sides thin on bedding. This is nest-building behavior. You can add a little more to the thinned areas so they aren't walking on the base of the cage.

To prevent or remove the smell of ammonia from your hamster's habitat, train your hamster to use a litter dish or simply find their pee corner and clean it out, replacing it with clean litter. See the section on sand and the chapter on litter for more information.

### **Paper and Aspen**

While it may be tempting to buy scented bedding to avoid any unpleasant smells, hamsters have sensitive respiratory systems, and it can cause inflammation on their skin. Dust-free aspen shavings are fine, but pine and cedar bedding contain harmful chemicals that are dangerous for your hamster's lung health.

You can mix and match any of these beddings. It is recommended that if you use aspen that you mix it with paper bedding, as unmixed aspen is very difficult for hamsters to burrow in. Monitor your hamster when using aspen for the first time as it's common for hamsters to have some sensitivity to it, causing respiratory issues and hair loss on their abdomen.

- Kaytee Clean & Cozy Small Pet Bedding
- Carefresh Small Pet Bedding
- All Living Things Small Pet Bedding
- So Phresh Natural Aspen Small Animal Bedding
- Coco peat or coconut fiber
- Hemp or flax bedding

### **Sand**

Sand baths simulate portions of the Syrian hamster's natural habitat. They use sand to clean themselves, and digging in the sand provides a source of stimulation and entertainment. It also can function as their litter if they're trained. Unlike chinchillas and other large rodents that use sand baths, sand

baths for Syrian hamsters can be left in the cage as part of their habitat. Do not use chinchilla bath dust or sand.

Clean your sand bath as needed to allow for your hamster to use it for both functions.

Find a container to be the sand bath around five inches in diameter. You can use large, flat-bottom bowls, ceramic containers, large glass containers, or whatever else you can find that works for your hamster and fits in their habitat. Some hamsters enjoy kicking their sand out of the container, so it may be handy to use a deep container and place a bendy bridge into it to allow for easy access to get in and outside of the container.

Known safe sands:

- Generic child-safe, outdoor play sand, washed and sanitized
- Zoo Med Repti Sand, natural white
- CaribSea Super Naturals aquarium sand
- Crayola Play Sand

### **Sanitizing Sand**

As many pet sand options are not safe for hamsters and their sensitive respiratory systems, you may want to use regular child-safe play sand, containing no chemicals, toxic dyes or added “effects.” Check the package of the sand to see if it has been heat-treated, also called “sanitized.” If it says it has been sanitized and the sand on the inside of the package is completely dry, you won’t need to sanitize it yourself.

Otherwise, you will need to sanitize it yourself by placing some sand in a baking sheet or other oven-safe dish at 350 F (176 C) for as long as it takes for the sand to dry, waiting for it to cool and placing into a container to use for later. If desired, you can use a sieve to sift out larger particles after you’ve sanitized the sand and before you store it.

Note: Dusty sand is a common problem when buying generic play sand. This is fixed by washing the sand, draining the water and then sanitizing it.

## **Escaped Hamster**

Even in large enclosures, your hamster might escape, whether it's because you forgot to close the cage or the hamster chewed a hole in the corner of a bin cage.

1. Close doors & temporarily seclude any other pets, such as putting cats in carriers or in a separate room with the door closed.
  - a. Put a towel under doors as hamsters can squeeze their way under doors
2. Check areas that a hamster would feel safe in, like under the couch, in the corner of a closet, etc.
3. Place their wheel out in the area you think they're in and check it periodically.
4. Set up a bucket trap by finding a large enough bucket your hamster could not escape from on their own, place their favorite food inside the bucket, then add a ramp to allow the hamster to reach the edge of the bucket. With any luck, they will jump inside the bucket but be unable to leave it.
5. Consider purchasing a humane live trap to help catch your hamster.
6. If you have a female and male hamster in the same household, check around the other's cage.
7. Place a box or carrier with their bedding and some food with easy access to get inside by themselves. In an unfamiliar environment, they may bed down in bedding that smells familiar with easy access to food and water.
8. Dust the floor with a light coating of flour if you have hardwood or laminate floors. This can help to see if your hamster passed through the area.

# Food

## Dry Food

Syrian hamsters are omnivores and require a higher protein diet than other small pets. You cannot use hay or high fiber seed mixes as their main source of food. For this reason, it is not recommended to use Oxbow's hamster food.

Ideal food makeup indicated on the nutrition labels (also called the “guaranteed analysis”) should be as close to the following numbers as possible. For younger hamsters, aim for the higher amount of protein as it supports healthy growth. For hamsters older than one year of age, aim for the lower amount of protein. For more information on older hamsters, see the chapter on elderly care.

- 18 - 23% protein
- 4 - 10% fat
- 8 - 15% fiber

Blocks should be the base of their diet, supplemented with a quality seed mix a couple times a week. You can find Teklad Blocks for sale at [Wee Companions' website](#) or using Amazon.

- Envigo Teklad Blocks 8640, for younger hamsters
- Envigo Teklad Blocks 2018, for older hamsters
- Mazuri Rat Blocks
- Higgin's Sunburst Hamster Mix

If you're unable to secure the examples above, use [The Hamingway's hamster food database](#) to search for appropriate hamster food using the numbers above.

## Fresh Food

Additionally, you'll want to supplement the dry food with fresh fruits and vegetables along with the occasional high protein snack. Including, but not limited to:

Kale	Spinach	Broccoli	Avocado
Pumpkin	Peas	Watermelon	Strawberries
Bananas	Hard-boiled or scrambled eggs	Cooked chicken or turkey	Mealworms, store-bought

For the full list, see the [Ontario Hamster Club's page](#).

## Treats

Not all treats come in the form of fresh or dried food. Syrian hamsters also have what is called the “pre-gastric pouch” that can digest lactose, so hamsters can enjoy dairy treats at all stages of their lives.

Some unconventional treats that hamsters love are:

- Grandma Lucy's Organic Oven-Baked Dog Treats
- Whimzee Dental Chews
- Gerber Puffs
- Cheese & Yogurt
- Love Child Organics Love Ducks

## Food to Avoid

Like all animals, there are also some foods you must avoid for their general health as some can be fatal:

- Tomato leaves
- Blue cheese or other soft/moldy cheeses
- Apple seeds
- Uncooked or raw beans
- Raw potatoes
- Eggplant/aubergine

- Rhubarb leaves
- Prepackaged deli meats
- Chili pepper

## **Mush**

In some cases, such as older hamsters with brittle teeth or for hamsters with health conditions that affect their teeth (such as hydrocephalus), it is recommended to make a mush using their lab blocks. The ethical breeders at [Cheeks and Squeaks](#) use a recipe they call [Wendell's Wonder Food](#). They also provide a list of [safe baby food for hamsters](#) to use in the recipe but can also be used on their own to supplement lab blocks.

### **Ingredients for Hamsters Under 1 Year Old**

- 1 Tablespoon Chia
- 6 Tablespoons water
- 4 oz container of high calorie baby food
- 10 pumps Vitaglow (optional, but recommended)
- 1 Tablespoon coconut oil
- 1 scoop Esbilac powder
- 1 Tablespoon Brewer's Yeast
- 12-13 Tablespoons block powder

### **Ingredients for Hamsters Over 1 Year Old**

- 1 Tablespoon Chia
- 6 Tablespoons water
- 4 oz container of high calorie baby food
- 1 Tablespoon coconut oil
- 1 Tablespoon Brewer's Yeast
- 12-13 Tablespoons block powder

**Directions**

1. Bring water to a boil. Measure out chia in a heatproof, medium-sized mixing bowl. Pour boiling water over chia, stir. Let soak for 5 minutes, stir again.
2. Add baby food, Vitaglow, and coconut oil to chia. Mix to combine.
3. Add Esbilac powder and brewer's yeast to bowl. Mix until homogeneous.
4. Slowly add block powder, a few spoonfuls at a time. Mix in between each addition. When finished, mixture should resemble a cookie dough consistency.
5. Keep refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 5 days.

# Cage Cleaning

With a proper cage size (minimum 600 square inches), you don't need to change the bedding out every week. Instead, you can deep clean (removing all the bedding) once a month and spot clean until then.

## Spot Cleaning

Spot cleaning entails cleaning their litter or pee corner, removing any soiled bedding, removing poop, and cleaning their nest of poop. This may include a once a week cleaning of their nest.

Avoid spot cleaning their nest too often as it may stress them out, but removing the poop and soiled bedding from their nest is necessary.

## Deep Cleaning

Even with spot cleaning, you'll still need to do a deep clean once every four to six weeks where you remove almost all the bedding and wipe away the cage to catch the dust. Hamsters have a sensitive respiratory system so making sure the cage is clear of dust is very important to their health.

Preserve approximately 20-25% of unsoiled bedding to distribute across the cage and place where they typically nest. This allows the cage to still smell like home for your hamster and helps avoid stress with each deep clean.

Note: Cages that are large enough and spot cleaned effectively can go many months without a deep clean. Frequent deep cleaning causes stress to your hamster so it is recommended to minimize it if possible.

## Cleaning Supplies

If you need to remove built up sediments or lingering smells, use a diluted white vinegar, chlorhexidine, or F10 to clean a cage once all the bedding is removed.



If a hamster died of some contagious disease or parasite, you'll need to clean the cage more thoroughly before using it for another hamster. Clean the cage using a diluted bleach solution of 10% bleach. Spray on the cage and let it soak for 10 minutes, then wipe with warm, soapy water. Do not put a hamster in this cage for a minimum of 24 hours.

## **Water**

### **Water Bottle**

Water bottles should have their contents changed out everyday or every other day to prevent bacterial buildup. To avoid any sediment growth, scrub the inside of the water bottle at least once a week. Then fill the water bottle with regular water. Check water bottles at least once a day to ensure they work and that your hamster is able to drink water from the bottle.

### **Water Bowl**

Water bowls are also an option for owners as they can provide a more natural and ergonomic way for hamsters to drink water, but these have to be cleaned more often than bottles as they're completely open to dust, bedding, and the hamsters themselves. To avoid some bedding or other debris from landing in the water, place it on an elevated platform in the cage. Change the water and clear the bowl once a day.

# Litter Training

Hamsters can be potty trained as they naturally will pick one corner to pee in and stick with that.

Buy a litter dish that is fit for their size (see earlier section on sand) and fill it with appropriate sand, granule bedding, or paper bedding. If your hamster picks a new corner that is not the corner you placed the dish, put the soiled bedding in the litter dish.

Empty the litter dish once the chosen litter is mostly or completely soiled, clean the dish and refill it with new litter.

**Warning!** Do not use litter meant for other animals, such as cats, especially litter that is meant to clump together when peed in. Chinchilla bath dust is too fine for a Syrian hamster's extremely sensitive respiratory system and should be avoided completely.

# Taming

When you take your hamster home for the first time, they will be nervous and a little scared of the new environment, new smells, and new people. Syrian hamsters have very poor eyesight and rely on their sense of smell to identify people, things, and environments. For hamsters unfamiliar with human touch, letting them adjust for one day in their new environment can be helpful.

Note: Hamsters adopted from ethical breeders are already tamed, which means that they are friendly to human touch and not likely to bite when approached or handled correctly. Do not give an already tamed hamster an adjustment period in which you do not handle them for a day or more, as their tameness can regress.

Put your hand in their cage and allow them to get used to it. You can place a few treats in your hand to get them closer to you, but do not grab them when they're not yet tame as it can result in biting and prolonging the taming process. It may take a few days before your hamster is comfortable getting close to your hand, but once they are, you can use a treat to lure them into standing in your hand. Once they're comfortable with that, you can slowly introduce lifting them from their cage to take them out.

Additionally, place your scent in their habitat by taking some toilet paper or non-scented tissue paper and rubbing it on yourself. This works best as they can use it to build their nest and interact with your scent safely in a way that stimulates them.

## Gloves

If you're nervous about being bit or have been bit in the past, try using clean, thick fabric or leather gloves. Gloves can also make you more confident as you attempt to tame them. If you're constantly jerking away your hand in fear or being bit, a protective glove can make you feel safer about interacting together.

# Handling

Note: Always wash your hands before and after you handle your hamster.

Young and untamed hamsters are more likely to jump from your hands. If you need to remove them from their cage for a deep cage clean, place their carrier or a small box in their cage. Place the hamster in it or wait for them to enter on their own and close the carrier or box. If you cannot or do not want to close a box, place the box somewhere your hamster can't escape, such as placing the box in a bathtub.

## Cuddle Pouches

Even when your hamster is tamed, they might be a little too excited or get scared at a new sound. Ideally, buying or crafting a “cuddle sack” or “cuddle pouch” from a heavy, double layered material is a great way to take them from room to room without fear of dropping them. Otherwise, hold them with two hands and close to your chest when you take them from their cage to play with them elsewhere.

## Free Roaming

Allowing your hamster to explore a safe area uninhibited is a great way to give your hamster most stimulation outside of their cage as well as a chance to play with your hamster. Letting them run around on your bed, in a hamster-proof room, or in a play pen with supervision can be a great way to bond with your pet and satisfy their urge to explore a larger environment.

## Exercise Balls

The iconic hamster ball is not to be used due to poor ventilation and the risk of injury from the ball itself, as limbs and nails can get caught on the ventilation holes available. As Syrian hamsters have poor eyesight, they cannot see the area they are supposedly exploring, which means that the ball isn't providing any more enrichment than the wheel inside the cage could.

## Picking Up

When picking up your hamster, it's recommended you let them climb into your hands. Additionally, rather than plucking them out of their cage from above, you can pick them up by using both hands to scoop them up. Avoid chasing your hamster around the cage.

While it's okay to pick them up by their midsection with one hand, it may not foster a good relationship with your hamster to be plucked from their cage when they don't want to interact with people, so prioritize training them to walk on your hand to take them out when they're awake.

Young, non-social, or untamed hamsters may be difficult to pick up with the aforementioned methods. If you do pluck them up around their midsection, quickly turn your hand so they are resting on their back, supported by your hand so they aren't dangling from the grasp, or you promptly place them into a ready cuddle sack.

If you worry about being bitten or are otherwise nervous to pick them up, shoo them into a hide, container, or mug that you can pick up with.

## Scruffing

Scruffing is the act of immobilizing your hamster by pulling back the scruff around the neck and shoulders with one hand and lifting them up so they're on their back, supported by the hand scruffing them so they're not dangling. This is done to keep your hamster still as you clip their nails, check their teeth, or otherwise inspect their body. While it may look uncomfortable for the hamster, they are not in pain so long as [the technique is performed correctly](#).

# Behavior

Hamsters are omnivorous creatures of prey, so some of their behaviors may seem strange to people only used to the behaviors of cats and dogs.

## Pouching

Hamsters have pockets in their cheeks called pouches that let them carry a lot of stuff from one place to another. In the wild, it would let them collect an array of seeds, berries and other foods found far from home and take it to their nest easily and efficiently. Hamsters will also use their cheeks to carry bedding.

## Nesting

Prey creatures will build a warm nest to sleep in and hide their food. Plenty of bedding, hides, bendy bridges and other forms of cover give them options for where and how to build their nest. Nests are their safe place, so it's important to be careful when disturbing their nest. Make sure you know your hamster is out of their nest or carefully remove them from their nest before you clean it as even a tame hamster will give a warning bite if you disturb the nest with them in it.

For hamsters that do not come out of their nest often during your waking hours, it's perfectly fine (and even recommended) that you dig or lure your hamster out of their nest to pick them up.

## Burrowing

Often in conjunction with nesting, burrowing is the act of building tunnels or digging through their bedding to get from one place to another. Hamsters have a natural instinct to burrow and enjoy burrowing as deep as they can, which is why it's important to provide them with ample bedding to burrow in. Not all hamsters feel a strong urge or desire to burrow and may prefer to build nests in a hide over burrowing deep into bedding, but it's important to provide the bedding. They may prefer to burrow deep underneath their nest, or they may use the ample bedding to rearrange their habitat to their liking.

## **Chewing**

It is a misconception that hamsters chew on items to maintain their teeth length. In actuality, their teeth are self-maintaining through a process called bruxing. However, chewing is still a natural instinct that can keep them stimulated and entertained, so providing items to chew on is still a great idea.

## **Vocalizations**

### **Chirping**

A soft or high pitched squeak is also known as a chirp! Hamsters can chirp for a variety of reasons, including being happy or excited. Female hamsters may also chirp when they're in heat.

### **Hissing**

Most animals will hiss when they feel attacked or threatened, and Syrian hamsters are no exception. Most hissing will be accompanied by flipping onto their back or standing upright on their back paws while baring their teeth.

### **Teeth Grinding/Bruxing**

Though it's not technically a vocalization, teeth grinding is still a method of auditory communication. Hamsters may grind their teeth together when they're frustrated or displeased, such as if they're being handled when they want to be left alone. Teeth grinding in their sleep or when they're visibly relaxed may be more of a tooth maintenance act than communication, as bruxing their teeth helps keep them at the proper length. Hamsters can also brux in contentment or enjoyment!

# Health

Despite being a small animal, Syrian hamsters still need to go to the vet when you suspect there is a problem with their health. Hamsters from breeding mills are more likely to have genetic health problems, such as a higher risk of stroke or heart disease, which is also why it's important to adopt hamsters from ethical breeders that breed with health as their first concern.

Symptoms that are especially important to get checked by a veterinarian include:

- Lethargy/fatigue
- Sudden weight increase/decrease
- Decreased appetite
- Masses/lumps
- Loss of fur
- Diarrhea
- Wheezing/sneezing
- Runny nose
- Hunched back
- Open sores
- Swelling

There are also health concerns that can result from the environment and diet that you can keep an eye out for and even prevent.

## Diabetes

Syrian hamsters aren't as prone to diabetes as dwarf hamsters are but it is still something to be aware of. Diabetes in Syrian hamsters is onset due to weight, not sugar content. However, a hamster will maintain a healthy weight when given a good habitat that includes a properly sized wheel and adequate enrichment.

## Diarrhea

Diarrhea in hamsters, easily diagnosed by loose, runny stool with wet fur around the posterior and tail. It's a myth that diarrhea can be caused by providing too



many watery vegetables or fruits as hamsters are proficient in managing their water intake. Diarrhea is a very serious symptom caused by a variety of things like stress, bacteria, viruses, parasites, and sometimes even as a side effect to prescribed antibiotics. If you see blood in their diarrhea, take them to a veterinarian immediately.

Some minor diarrhea can be the result of an upset tummy that will pass, similar to when humans get stressed or eat something that doesn't agree with them. It should still be closely monitored, and if it shows no signs of improvement within 24 hours, you should schedule an appointment with your veterinarian and make sure your hamster is hydrated in the meantime.

## **Overheating**

Syrian hamsters do best in temperatures of 65-75 F (20-22 C). Extreme heat can result in dehydration and heatstroke. Keep your hamster cool in the summer by making sure they always have enough water and consider moving them to a cooler portion of the house. You can also give them treats of frozen vegetables like frozen peas or chill some hamster-safe sand before placing it in their sand bath container.

## **Scent Glands**

All Syrian hamsters have one black dot on each hip called scent glands, which are used to leave their scent on things they've rubbed on. Some hamsters may scratch and over groom the area to activate the glands, which will cause the fur around them to look wet. This is a normal behavior from the hamster and a normal function of the scent glands.

## **Teeth**

### **Color**

Healthy hamster teeth are a golden yellow or orange color. There is no need to brush your hamster's teeth. If your hamster's teeth suddenly turn white, take

them to the vet as it can be a result of trauma to the teeth and cause them to become brittle and prone to breakage.

### **Length**

A hamster's teeth will never stop growing, but a healthy pair of teeth will be kept at a normal length through bruxing, otherwise known as teeth grinding. If a tooth gets chipped, broken, or misaligned, their teeth may overgrow.

Once their teeth have grown to a length in which they cannot open their mouth enough for the tips of their teeth to touch, it becomes very hard for them to eat and makes it even harder for them to maintain their own teeth length. In extreme situations, their front teeth may perforate the roof of their mouth if they grow too long.

If your hamster's teeth are too long or are unable to grind them down by themselves, you will need the vet to maintain them. Do not attempt to fix this yourself!

### **Bar Burn**

If a hamster is stressed or bored and the habitat includes wire bars, they may chew on the bars which can misalign the teeth and result in bar burn on the tops of their snouts where the wires rub against their fur while chewing. Bar biting can also result in breaking teeth.

### **Torpor**

Though it looks similar to hibernation, torpor is a serious health concern for Syrian hamsters as it's a last ditch effort at survival. This can happen when the room is too cold, and the likelihood increases if the hamster doesn't have enough food or water and feels the need to conserve energy and resources. To prevent torpor, make sure the hamster's room is well heated (65-75 F or 20-22 C) and that food and water are available.

A hamster in torpor can appear deceased, as they are cold and curled into a ball. Unlike a deceased hamster, a hamster in torpor will typically be found in their nest. Other signifiers of torpor include their heartbeat dropping to three beats per minute and breathing once every one to two minutes. Check their nose and feel for discoloration as a hamster in torpor's nose and feet will turn blue as blood is not getting pumped through their body fast enough.

### **The Wrong Way**

Bringing a hamster out of torpor must be done correctly to avoid death. Do not warm your hamster using a heat pad or any other warming device. Doing so will warm the blood before the heart is ready, placing strain on it. While they will wake up and look fine, they will suffer from heart failure a few hours afterwards and die.

### **The Right Way**

A warning before you start the process of warming them up with this method: it is better to let your hamster stay in torpor as you ready yourself for this process, such as if you need to quickly run to the store for a source of sugar. Do not warm up the room they're in until they've awoken from this method.

1. Warm up sugar water by mixing together 1 cup of warm water,  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of sugar and 1 teaspoon of salt and mix until dissolved. If the sugar water mixture cools at any point, warm it back up again.
2. Pick up your hamster and uncurl them open from their curled up position. Scruff them so their backs are on your hand and they're facing up with their mouth open. Lean them back at about 45 degrees so their head points towards the ground. Rotate them sideways to have access to the side of their mouth.
3. Use a spoon, water dropper, small feeding syringe or straw to pick up a few drops of the sugar water and run the sugar water across their tongue so it enters the side of their mouth and exits the other side. Use a towel or paper towel to catch the runoff sugar water. Do this once every one to two

minutes for half an hour. In between each session, place them on a soft towel.

This method helps bring your hamster out of torpor safely as the tongue will absorb some of the warm sugar water, heating up the body from the inside and providing simple sugars for energy. Holding them down and tilted to the side helps prevent any risk of the sugar water entering the lungs.

After waking up from torpor, your hamster will likely move slowly, wobbly and shakily for a few hours. You can feed your hamster the warm sugar water normally, rather than the runoff method, for 10 to 20 minutes or until the hamster no longer accepts the warm sugar water.

At this point, you can warm up the room if it was not already within healthy ranges and provide a warm towel for your hamster. Some hamsters will feel particularly vulnerable after coming out of torpor and will not wish to be held, so you can simply place them back in their cage to warm themselves up in their nest.

**Important!** After you've brought your hamster out of torpor, make a vet appointment to assess the health of your pet. Make sure your hamster stays hydrated as it's key to survival after torpor.

## Weight

There is no ideal weight that applies to every single hamster as weight is relative to the size of the hamster, so there is a wide range of what can be considered a healthy weight for a hamster. A healthy weight for a Syrian hamster can be anywhere from 100 to 300 grams. Syrian hamsters from breeding mills, such as those found in pet stores, will often be on the lower end of the scale, from around 100 to 200 grams, though that will not always be the case. Hamsters from ethical breeders will more often be bigger and can weigh anywhere from 125 to 300 grams.

Hamsters born with poor health or were not able to properly develop in childhood, whether it was from a lack of food and resources or stress, may be stunted in their growth and not be able to reach the common range of weight for other hamsters.

It is important to keep track of their weight, as a sudden decrease in weight is cause for concern and a visit to your veterinarian. Weigh them on a scale once a week and log the day and their weight into a notebook.

### **Obesity**

You can identify signs of obesity in a hamster by the folds in their fur, most notably around their arms. When they stand up on their back legs, you can check to see if the fur around the arms folds in a way that looks like “water wings.”

### **Wet Tail**

Wet Tail, also known as “Proliferative Ileitis”, is a bacterial infection in the gut for young hamsters (three to six weeks of age, up to 12 weeks of age) after being weaned from the mother, with the main symptom being diarrhea. This has a 90% fatality rate. If you suspect your hamster has Wet Tail, take them to a veterinarian immediately.

### **Note on Veterinarian Care**

Syrian hamsters, despite being a staple pet of many childhoods, are not treated by regular veterinarians but by exotic or “pocket pet” veterinarians that tend to be more expensive. You should expect appointments to cost about \$90 USD, not including the cost of treatments or medications. It’s important to have funding set aside for the vet before you adopt a hamster and to continue to contribute to that fund every month.

# Hydrocephalus & Brachycephaly

Hydrocephalus, known as “Water on the Brain,” and Brachycephaly, known as “Flat Head Syndrome” are two conditions commonly seen together, as hydrocephalus most often causes brachycephaly. While some brachycephaly cases can exist without hydrocephalus, it is not very common and the treatment is typically the same. Hydrocephalus needs to be diagnosed by a veterinarian. Severe hydrocephalus may result in some neurological issues.

Hydrocephalus is a genetic condition in which there is a buildup of fluid in the cavities within the brain, increasing the size of the cavities and putting pressure on the brain. This causes brachycephaly, the condition that appears as the deformation of the skull, often appearing as enlarged or bulging eyes and a shorter snout. These deformities can then result in issues with their front teeth and possible issues with breathing through their nose, as hamsters are obligate nasal breathers.

From here on out, this guide will refer to both conditions as “hydro hamsters” for brevity.

The information for caring for hydro hamsters comes from the ethical breeders at Cheeks and Squeaks, who have experience caring for several hydro hamsters.

## Teeth

Hydro hamsters may have missing, malformed or brittle teeth. Depending on the severity, the teeth may need monthly attention by a veterinarian to burr the teeth down to a healthy length or the hamster may need to have the teeth in question removed completely. Clipping the teeth is to be avoided as it can shatter the teeth.

## **Food**

For hydro hamsters missing all or most of their teeth or who's teeth are so brittle as to completely avoid hard food, they will typically eat a diet composed completely of soft foods. It is recommended you use Wendell's Wonder Food, the recipe provided earlier in the chapter on food or on the Cheeks and Squeaks website, as it was originally created as a full diet replacement for hydro hamsters. Feed your hydro hamster ½ to 1 teaspoon per serving twice a day, and do not leave the food in the cage for longer than 8 hours.

In addition to Wendell's Wonder Food, you can feed them liquid baby food, homemade baby food by using a food processor or blender, or soft foods like bananas.

For hamsters completely on a soft food diet, they will not be able to hoard food on the same scale as other Syrian hamsters can and thus need to be fed often and on a regular schedule.

## **Handling**

In some cases of severe hydrocephalus, scruffing a hydro hamster may cause their eyes to pop out as they lack the structure of the skull to keep their eyes in place during the scruffing. Wash your hands first and use a clean finger to carefully push their eyes back into place when this happens.

## **Play and Stimulation**

Most advice for keeping your hamster's mind stimulated will include having a proper wheel and some chew toys. Because of a hydro hamster's teeth, stimulation through chew toys is not always an option. To supplement this, offer items they can push around, mazes to navigate, and areas to dig. You can also offer forage mixes, with hamster safe dry leaves, herbs or flowers, that your hamster can sniff to investigate.

# Elderly Care

Hamsters after one year of age are considered to be seniors though they may not show signs of aging until a year and a half. When they come closer to two years of age, they may find it harder to move around and climb so an adjustment in their cage setup may be necessary, such as moving their food or water to the main floor instead of requiring a climb to a second level.

## Dietary Changes

Once a hamster begins to slow down in their old age, whether they're at one year of age, a year and a half or two years, it is recommended you switch them to a lower protein diet, such as the Envigo Teklad Blocks 2016 formula or Living World Extrusion food blocks. Reducing protein intake for senior hamsters helps prevent renal or kidney failure.

In older age, some may develop more brittle teeth and require a softer diet. For that, it is recommended that you supplement their diet with baby food and/or Wendell's Wonder Food recipe.

## Personality Changes

You may notice a slight change in your hamster's personality. Some may become less social with their owners, instead preferring to hang out in their hides or nest. Others may become more docile and accepting of human interactions. There are cases in which they may become grouchy and more prone to bite or nip their owners. This is natural and not cause for concern.

Note: Sometimes sudden and aggressive biting, when hamster has not known to bite before, can be a sign the hamster is in pain.



**Arthritis**

Some hamsters may develop arthritis in their later life. If you are concerned about your hamster having arthritis, ask your vet about the supplement glucosamine.

**Palliative/End of Life Care**

If you are told by your vet that your hamster is close to the end of their lives or they are over two years old and you've noticed they've slowed down significantly, it is then you are welcome to spoil your hamster with all the treats they want.

# Pregnancy

This section is meant for rescues who have taken in a possible pregnant female, for those whose hamsters have escaped their cages and mated together, or for those that bring home a hamster from the pet store and find out that they are pregnant. This guide is not to help you learn to breed. Breeding should only be done with proper knowledge and under mentorship.

Understanding all aspects of the pregnancy and early development of the litter will help ensure the best outcome for both the mother hamster and her young.

The main source for this section is the Strong Brew Hamstery's Pregnancy Crash Course (<https://strongbrew.ca/crashcoursepregnancy>) as well Strong Brew Hamstery's ethical breeder herself, Julianna Rock.

## The Mother Hamster

The mother hamster is flooded with pregnancy hormones that heighten her territorial instincts when raising and nursing her young. This causes her to become more defensive and territorial in order to protect herself and her young. Pregnant and nursing hamsters need help and special accommodations for a safe pregnancy, delivery, and rearing of her young.

## Pregnancy Watch

If you believe a hamster you bought from the pet store or rescued is pregnant, it's important to put her on pregnancy watch starting on the day you bring her home. The pregnancy watch is 16 days long, which is the period of gestation for Syrian hamsters. You may choose to treat her like a pregnant hamster during this time by placing her in a maternity bin, providing the proper food and following the procedure for a pregnant hamster until the 16 days are up.

If you're nearing the last three days of pregnancy watch and there are no signs of pregnancy, such as a pear shaped body or puckered nipples, it is reasonable to assume she is not pregnant and can be treated as a normal pet hamster.

## **Behavior**

A pregnant or nursing hamster has a lot of hormones rushing through her system that make her very protective of herself and her pups. This can cause her to attack you when you go to change food or water. This is normal and not a predictive behavior of how she'll treat her pups. Mother hamsters should be given patience and space. Handling should be brief, minimal, and inside the enclosure. Pregnant hamsters should not be given free roam time, and if handled, should be done with the utmost care. A plastic food storage container is a great, safe way to handle a pregnant hamster.

## **Culling**

Culling is a very normal behavior from female hamsters. This is not a sign of a cruel or heartless mother but a behavior meant to protect her and any remaining pups. They often have several reasons for doing so:

- She may feel like she and her pups are in danger and the only way to save them from a cruel life is to end it early.
- She could be too stressed from her environment or being a first time mother that she abandons or culls the pups.
- She may feel like she does not have the resources, like adequate milk production or a lack of food or water in her environment, and may cull some or all of her pups.
- She may be too young and overwhelmed and may cull them for not feeling ready.
- She may sense birth defects or other abnormalities in her pups and end their lives early.

If the mother hamster has culled some or all of her pups, do not attempt to punish her, hurt her, or euthanize her. Humans can help reduce stress by non-interference. If the mother is overwhelmed, a blanket draped over a portion of the enclosure can help her feel secure. At the end of the day, mother knows best. Trust her instincts.

## **Food**

Pregnant hamsters can be fed the same as other adult hamsters (i.e., a high variety mix and high protein lab block). No changes should be done prior to labor. Be careful not to over indulge her with excess protein, as the pups may grow too large while they are still in utero and could cause complications during delivery.

Nursing hamsters should have access to extra protein, vitamin and mineral rich vegetables, and mush, specifically the recipe for Wendell's Wonder Food (the recipe can be found in the chapter on food) or non-flavored, sugar-free oatmeal to help the development of the pups as well as to support her ability to nurse. Foods rich in Vitamin K, like kale and dandelion, are great additions to their diet post-labour. If milk supply is a concern, a small pinch of fenugreek powder or seeds can be added to the mush given for the first 7 days. Provide the mother hamster with fresh mush and vegetables, like cucumbers or kale twice daily.

When her pups are able to eat solid foods, around two weeks of age, increase the portions of the protein, vegetables, and mush so all can partake.

At no point should the hamsters be provided with dog, cat or any other species foods like kibble or wet food. Many of these foods are fortified and the excess of vitamins and minerals can negatively impact the hamsters.

## **Maternity Bin**

### **Cage Size**

While a normal cage should abide by the rule “the bigger, the better” that is not the case for pregnant and nursing hamsters. The cage shouldn’t be exceedingly small, but it should be small enough that the pups aren’t able to wander too far away from the nest on their own, making it hard for the mother to keep her pups safe in the nest until they’re old enough not to rely on her completely for food and warmth. It’s recommended you use a bin cage that provides about 450 to 600 square inches, as these are light and easy to travel if you need to take the mom and her pups to the vet. Whether it’s the pups or the mom who need medical attention, both must travel with each other.

### **Wheel**

Prior to delivery, the wheel should be removed no sooner than 24 hours before the due date, as there is a chance of her injuring the pups she carries when rubbing up against the sides of the wheel and to avoid the chance of her taking her pups into the wheel with her and harming them as she runs.

However pregnant mothers can become restless leading up to delivery. This behavior can manifest in self-destructive ways such as climbing or jumping, which can harm the pups she carries. If this is the case, then it is best to reduce injury to mum and her offspring by allowing the wheel in the enclosure until birth. Upon birthing her pups, remove the wheel immediately.

Once removed, the wheel should not be replaced until the mother has weaned her pups at four weeks of age. Pups can easily be trampled or flung out of a wheel by an overzealous mother. If your mother hamster is restless and her babies are over 2 weeks of age, you can give her small breaks in a playpen to exercise with a wheel.

## **Concerns and Complications**

Pregnancy and birth are stressful on a mother hamster's body, meaning the process is full of things that may go wrong.

### **Miscarriage**

If you saw the signs of pregnancy in your hamster, but there is no evidence of a delivery having occurred, it is likely that she miscarried and reabsorbed the pregnancy. There is no special need to visit a vet after a miscarriage unless she shows concerning symptoms of a decline in health (bloating, bleeding, general discomfort). Most miscarriages will happen earlier on in a pregnancy and are not a cause for concern.

### **Delivery Complications**

Most complications during or after delivery will require a visit to the vet as they could indicate a pup is stuck in the mother or other serious problems.

- Screaming during delivery
- Excessive blood after delivery
- Bluish tint to nipples or abdomen
- Abnormal swelling or pus from the vents (vulva)
- Lying awkwardly

# Development

## **Before Birth**



The maternity bin should be cleaned about three days before the mother hamster gives birth to ensure a clean environment for her to give birth as you will not be able to clean it for two weeks after she's given birth, including spot cleaning. Any ramps, bridges, tunnels, tubes, platforms, sand baths and litter should be removed during this time. Pups will begin wandering out of the nest before their eyes open. Anything that could pose a hazard and trap a pup must be removed. You can provide a well ventilated hide for mum to have her pups in, however a cardboard box with the bottom removed will work in a pinch. Avoid plastic hides as those can trap moisture and humidity.

Loud noises may scare the mother and cause her to cull some or all of the pups, so the maternity cage should be kept somewhere quiet, especially if the mother is new to you. Hamsters who are more familiar with their surroundings may tolerate noises, however any hamster can become reactive when pregnant or rearing pups. If the mother seems particularly restless, a towel or blanket over a portion of the enclosure may help her feel more secure.





## **Birth to Two Weeks**


Hamster pups will be born small, pink and hairless. They will stay in the mother's nest and nurse from her. They are completely reliant on her for the first two weeks for warmth and food. Humans should not disturb the cage, take pictures, or interact with the mother or the pups at this age. The only allowed interaction is to quickly and quietly replace food and water as needed.

If you were not aware your hamster was pregnant and suddenly saw the pups, use the images below to help identify which age they may be.

	
<p><b>Day 1:</b> Newborn pups are very small with translucent skin and no signs of fur. Their eyes and ears are closed. You can see the severed umbilical cord on their stomachs.</p> <p>Their skin is translucent. This allows a view of their stomach which should be filled with white milk, which is known as a milk band.</p>	<p><b>Day 3:</b> Every day their skin will become less pink and start to take on the pigment of their adult colour. Their ears begin to lift up more from their skull. They are still unable to see or hear.</p>



	
<p><b>Day 5:</b> The coat is beginning to come in. The pups look like they have a series of thin hairs over their body. For darker coloured hamsters like golden and black, they will look heavily pigmented.</p> <p>Coat is a little darker but the skin still appears wrinkled.</p>	<p><b>Day 8:</b> Pups now have a decent coat of fur. White areas of fur will still look pink, but will have hair over them. They are beginning to eat solids and will snack on their mother's feces (this builds good gut flora) as well as food she brings back to the nest for them. They should be offered chopped cucumber by this stage to assist with the introduction of solid foods.</p>
	

<p><b>Day 10:</b> Their colored fur is growing thicker and umbilical cords are gone, replaced by a small, visible “belly button” that white fur is not thick enough to hide the spot. It is at this age that they begin to wander outside of the nest. Larger litters begin adventuring sooner than smaller litters. Smaller litters are less likely to wander in search of food and their mother will be better at corralling them. They are a bit unsure on their feet and wobbly.</p>	<p><b>Day 12:</b> By day 12 hamster pups begin looking like real hamsters. Their coats are thicker and they are more coordinated. They will protest loudly when their mother tries to bring them back to the nest. Their ears are beginning to lift up more and their eyes look less bulgy.</p>
	
<p><b>Day 14:</b> Most litters will begin opening their eyes around day 14, however larger litters may open them later. They will not keep their eyes open for long. They are coordinated, seemingly insatiable, and will begin playing and tussling with their siblings.</p> <p>Pups will now begin to open their eyes but not for long.</p>	

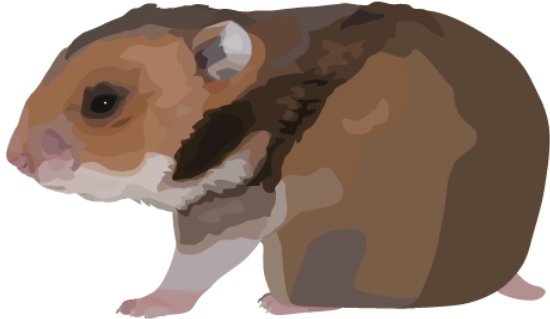

## **Two to Four Weeks**

Hamster pups will open their eyes anywhere from 14 to 18 days old depending on litter and pup size (i.e., larger litter, slower to open eyes). After they have opened their eyes, it is safe to interact with the pups and clean the cage. Please be mindful that hamster pups have an easily triggered fight or flight instinct. They are very likely to leap out of your hands with no warning. For this reason, handling is best done over a soft, low surface. If you must move them from one enclosure to another, using a mug is a good option. This method also helps if the mother is still hormonal and protective and may possibly attack your hand when attempting to move her pups.

Pups will interact with each other by grooming each other, eating food together, stealing each other's food, playing and play-fighting. They may make noise. This play-fighting is completely normal as it teaches baby hamsters bite inhibition and is good cognitive stimulation. While most domesticated species are solitary, they are social with their siblings and mom until approximately five to eight weeks of age.

At 21 days old, the mom will begin to wean her pups off her milk and may push them away when they try to nurse. This is normal and does not mean you should remove the mom. They will continue to rely on her to learn normal behaviors, gain immunity, and comfort nurse. The urge to suckle in baby hamsters is strong, and when split too early, they may self-mutilate in an attempt to suckle.

It is around this age that mum may begin getting restless and trying to get out. You can provide her time outside the enclosure in a playpen to use a wheel and roam.

	
<p><b>Day 16:</b> By day 16 baby hamsters will keep their eyes open as they navigate the bin. They will begin sleeping independently of their mother. This is a good time to introduce safe toys, like tubes and a variety of chewing textures. Their ears begin to slowly lift off their heads.</p>	<p><b>Three weeks:</b> Now the baby hamsters are weaned from their mother. Some mothers will allow them to continue nursing. This is done for comfort and humans shouldn't interfere. They are very active, voracious and playful. They will wrestle and squeak at their siblings. This is the age to introduce a sand bath to them. Pups rely on "monkey-see monkey-do" and will imitate their mother's behaviour.</p>

## Four to Six Weeks

At 28 days old, the mom needs to be separated from the pups. On the same day the mom is separated, the pups should also be separated by sex as they will soon begin to sexually mature, but pups should still remain with their same-sex siblings to learn important social skills and behaviors like bite inhibition, proper grooming, burrowing, handling their heat cycle, nesting, hoarding, and so on. Additionally, playing with their siblings is good fun for each other.

Once they're separated by sex, a wheel can be added to their environments. It is helpful to allow short bursts with the wheel, and gradually introduce it for longer periods.





**Four weeks:** The baby hamsters will look less like babies and more like real hamsters! Depending on the circumstances and how you supplemented the litter's nutrition, they may even be a comparable size to their mother. Their play is a bit more fierce but is still considered safe play.

## Sexing

A male hamster will have testicles that drop behind their anus and their tail. When retracted, they may be hard to see. When dropped, they may appear pink or red. They may drop even further and produce what looks like two smaller balls. There is some space between the penis and the anus, about the width of a pinky nail. Male hamsters have no nipples.

Female hamsters can be identified by their nipples which line the undersides of their bellies. Their vagina and anus are close together.

	
Male	Female

## Six to Eight Weeks

Same sex siblings should remain together for as long as possible. It is typically around the six to eight week mark that they may begin to fight in a way that harms one another, though some litters may fall out earlier. Hamsters should be separated no later than eight weeks of age. Even if they haven't begun to fight each other yet, it is not a risk you want to take.

## Identifying Aggression

The same way that kittens and puppies will play-fight with their littermates to learn important social skills, hamster pups play-fight with their littermates too. The difference between cats and dogs and hamsters is that hamsters will eventually become territorial for the rest of their lives and require a solitary lifestyle, so it's important to recognize the difference between a play fight or a real fight in order to determine if a hamster needs to be separated from their littermates.

Biting that targets the cheeks on their face or their rumps are safe areas to "attack" due to being fatty or fleshy areas. This type of play is food motivated, as you'll often see hamster siblings go into the cheek pouches of their mother or

siblings to steal food. This behavior is normal and will typically be reciprocated. Biting that takes place on the stomach would be more of a cause for concern but may also be play.

Play does not include chasing and is generally reciprocated, unless it involves the stealing of snacks. Pay attention to the kinds of noises that the hamsters are producing. A small, quick squeak or series of squeaks is normal during a play-fight, but a loud, sustained high-pitched squeak is a cry for help during a more serious fight.

Keep an eye out for chasing. If a hamster is attempting to escape a fight and the other hamster is chasing them across the cage to continue the fight, then it is time to separate the chaser.

## **Concerns and Complications**

### **Runts**

Runts are a common occurrence in hamster litters, especially larger hamster litters. This is often from a lack of development in the womb rather than the inability to get food from bigger, stronger siblings. Runts may be smaller due to a congenital issue, such as underdeveloped or missing organs. While many runts do live normal lives and catch up to their siblings and may require additional care, like hand raising or first access to mush. Some runts may not survive at all.

### **Bloat**

Bloat is an understudied and not well understood condition that occurs in some hamster pups. It presents with a swollen abdomen and a yellowish hue to the skin before death. Bloat has a 100% mortality rate and it is often kinder to euthanize when possible.

**Failure to Thrive**

Even with perfect care, a hamster pup just might fail to thrive and pass away. Usually a pup will fail to thrive early, however some may begin to decline closer to weaning (21 days). Depending on the age of the other pups, the body of the deceased hamster may be eaten by their siblings or the mother. Disposing of a body this way is normal for hamsters and should not be punished or separated from their mother or each other before day 28.

**Wet Tail**

Wet Tail, also known as “Proliferative Ileitis”, is a bacterial infection in the gut for young hamsters (three to six weeks of age, up to 12 weeks of age) after being weaned from the mother, with the main symptom being diarrhea. This has a 90% fatality rate. If you suspect your hamster has Wet Tail, take them to a veterinarian immediately.

**Orphaned or Abandoned**

A hamster pup and their siblings that have been separated from their mother too early or the mother has died will require special care and attention. Hamster pups orphaned under the age of seven days have extremely low rates of survival and it is recommended they be humanely euthanized by a veterinarian.

Until they are four weeks old, pups should be given a small stuffed animal to latch on for comfort. Male pups have a tendency to latch onto their penis and mutilate their body if not given another option.

**Feeding and Pottyng**

The mother hamster provides nutrients to her pups both through her milk and her poop. You can feed the hamster pups Esbilac Puppy formula to supplement her milk. As hamster's gain important gut bacteria that is important to their digestive system, it is recommended that you add fresh hamster poop to hamster mush (see chapter on food for Wendell's Wonder Food recipe) and blend it in.



The fresher the poop, the better. Males are easiest to get fresh feces from as you can feel the poop in the colon and massage it out.

For pups under ten days old, you will need to stimulate their bowels manually to produce urine and feces. To do this, use a wet cotton swab to gently massage the area should help encourage this behavior, similar to how their mother would lick them. After pottyng the pups, you should feed them. Hamsters ten days or older generally do not need pottyng, however it's good practice to check on them to ensure they are doing it themselves.

Feed and potty hamsters under ten days old once every one to two hours. A paint brush, unused makeup sponge, or a squirrel hand raising kit will work to safely deliver the Esbilac formula. Pups can eat as much until they have their fill. Great care should be given when hand raising as aspiration is a huge risk and can lead to pneumonia.

Pups over ten days old can be fed every two to three hours. The more you can encourage them to eat mush over using liquid formula, the better, as it reduces risk of aspiration. Hand raised pups should always be given free access to mush, vegetables and regular hamster food. They eat solids from day seven and onwards.

It may be a good idea to provide a heating pad on low underneath a small section of their enclosure. Pups can go hypothermic easily.

### **No Siblings**

Sometimes hamsters are born without siblings, lose their siblings growing up, or are removed from their siblings too early. This mainly impacts their social development, as they learn important behaviors from their siblings. Females can remain with their mom, provided she is tolerant, for an additional few days.

## F.A.Q.

### **You recommend breeders, but I thought all breeders were bad?**

Animal mills and irresponsible breeders give breeding a bad name, but not all breeders breed for profit. Ethical breeders keep track of pedigrees, remove hamsters from breeding lines if it comes out they have health issues or problems, do not breed their females more than two or three times, etc. Their adoption fees are a fraction of what it takes to breed and raise their hamsters though they are more “expensive” than a mill bred pet store hamster.

You may see people insist you should never get a hamster from a breeder and that you should instead only rescue. While this can be good advice for cats and dogs, who often have oopsie litters that flood cat and dog rescues, the vast majority of rescue hamsters come from backyard breeders (irresponsible breeders that don’t breed for health first) and rodent mills that were sold for profit to owners that couldn’t care for them or didn’t know how to and who would eventually put them up to rehome or rescued by an outside source.

It’s important to support ethical breeders as the humane alternative to rodent mills and backyard breeders, as the eventual hope is that only ethical breeders and small animal rescues would be a source for hamster adoption.

### **Where can I find an ethical breeder near me?**

Currently, there are only a handful in North America. Check the California Hamster Association’s (CHA) online list of ethical breeders in North America. If you have seen a hamster breeder online calling themselves ethical but they are not on the list, try emailing the CHA and asking if it is an oversight or if there’s a reason they were not included on the list as not all hamsteries that call themselves ethical breeders may follow all the rules ethical breeders are expected to follow. For Canadian-only information, check the Ontario Hamster Club’s list of registered breeders.

**Which rescues have hamsters?**

Any rescue could have hamsters! Unless they specifically say they're a pet-specific rescue, it's possible a hamster could be surrendered to them. Google your local rescues, check their websites, then call or email them if you can't find a good answer online. They may even know of a rescue in the area that does handle hamsters.

You can also check on Craigslist or other similar websites for people who are looking to rehome their hamster. These hamsters may not always come from a good home with the proper equipment. When rescuing a hamster, you should be extra aware of the fact they may have been neglected and/or abused, which may lead them to have a fear of hands, cage rage (an extreme territorial response, often seen in hamsters who have lived their lives in extremely tiny habitats). These hamsters need a good and loving home, if you're willing to handle a rescue hamster.

**I got different care information at the pet store than what's on here. Which should I follow?**

Please follow the information in this guide over what pet stores tell you. Unless you have found the hamster haven of pet stores, pet stores are not your friend or a trustworthy source of information. This includes both large chain pet stores and smaller locally owned pet stores. Pet store employees are not trained in all the various aspects of small animal care. They may be told to follow a script in order to sell items or are following a care guide developed by the company that is far below humane standards of care.

**Why do pet stores have Syrian hamsters in the same display case together if they're solitary?**

Baby Syrian hamsters don't develop their territorial instincts until about 6 to 8 weeks old, and it's good for their development to be with their siblings until they display their territorial instincts as they learn important hamster behavior skills from each other, similar to how puppies and kittens learn important social skills

by playing with their siblings. Once they graduate from play fighting to serious fighting and chasing, they need to be separated immediately to avoid injury and possible death.

**My veterinarian recommended Oxbow and said they wouldn't recommend it if it wasn't important. Should I feed them Oxbow then?**

Ask them what specifically about the Oxbow food is important to the health of your hamster and how it will fix the issue. For example, if they recommend Oxbow herbivore critical care because they need easily digestible food and fluids while they recover from an illness or procedure, use Wendell's Wonder Food recipe instead and add a little more water to the mixture in order to feed them using a feeding syringe. Oxbow's herbivore critical care might be the best thing a veterinarian can offer to help, but it is not the best option. Ask if they have Emeraid Omnivore instead.

If they're recommending Oxbow as the base of their diet, then ignore that advice. Oxbow does not meet the nutritional requirements that Syrian hamsters need and would be unhealthy for them to live on. Oxbow products are fantastic for many herbivorous small animals and rodents, such as rabbits and guinea pigs, but should not be recommended for hamsters.

**You recommend some brand name items. Are you sponsored or getting paid by them to include these items?**

Not at all! This care guide is a labor of love. I will not sell it nor accept any money to include items in it. The reason I include brand name items is to make it easier for people to find what they're looking for online, as some of the best stuff isn't carried in physical retail stores. If new information comes out that a product is no longer acceptable for Syrian hamsters, it will be taken off this care guide.

**Is this a comprehensive care guide?**

No. Though I've tried my best to provide most of the information of what Syrian hamsters need to be happy and healthy as pets, this is not comprehensive in all aspects of Syrian hamster care or health. I'm not a small animal/exotic/pocket

pet veterinarian or an expert on Syrian hamsters. I love all hamsters, I love to learn, I love reading studies and journals and peer-reviewed articles, and I love to share what I learn. It also happens I have training in technical and professional writing, so I decided to put those skills to use in helping others help hamsters. Additionally, it's a way of saving me time from typing out the same information to a million different people.

## About the Author

I got my first hamster at age 14, and I've had them for a decade since. The majority of them were from Petco and Petsmart. There was, unfortunately, a period in which they died rapidly in my care to which I found out it was the food I was giving them (the generic hamster seed mix from the bins at Winco), so I'm not entirely sure how many hamsters I've had. It might've also compounded with the fact they lived in what was likely a travel carrier, not a real cage. I don't remember when but I eventually switched to a bigger cage, a wire cage a little smaller than a 20-gallon tank. None of these hamsters lived anywhere close to two years of age.



I eventually decided to stop supporting mill bred hamsters in 2017 when I got my hamster, Nilla, from a local pet store that bred their own hamsters because I figured backyard breeding was better than a hamster from a rodent mill. Nilla didn't get the kind of care described in this document until the last month or two of her life when I finally had the funds and ability to get her a big enough cage and wheel. Unfortunately, Nilla suddenly passed away after having her for one year, but she was one of the sweetest hamsters I had so I went back to the same pet store and got my girl Spooky, who seemed to be somewhat related to Nilla, likely cousins of some sort. Spooky lived her best life with me for almost two years, with a proper wheel, cage, bedding, and food. She was my longest living hamster, a sweet girl who loved to sleep in my hands.

At the time of writing this, I care for two hamsters, Phoenix and Keyleth (who have separate cages) from a local ethical breeder. I recommend the experience of getting a hamster from an ethical breeder not just because the hamsters live longer due to healthier genetics and care from an earlier age, but because I get to know who their parents are, I get pictures from when they were babies, and I get to follow their siblings if their pet-parents post about them online. I even made a new friend because she has a hamster from the same litter as Phoenix.

My ability to provide a proper habitat for my hamsters was inhibited by the fact I was a minor without a source of income to be able to buy the things I needed for my pets, and my parents were under the impression we were already providing them with the proper care that needed no improvements. All of this is to say that I didn't know everything I needed to know when I started caring for Syrian hamsters, and that it's not a moral failing if you didn't give them the best care before you knew the right information or had the ability to act. Now that you have access to all of the information in one place, I hope you take it to heart and make the necessary changes to give your pet their best life.

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Thanks to *Kuddles and Scales*, for whom this project initially started.

Thanks to the Facebook hamster groups where I was able to see what common things new or experienced hamsters struggled with or didn't know as it gave me insight into what else should be included.

Thanks to my wonderful friends and kind strangers who looked over my document to see if it made sense, if it covered everything a beginner hamster owner should know, and to find all the little errors and typos.

Thanks to Christine Hoang, who's photography skills gave me the reference picture I needed to draw the cover page.



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This document relies on knowledge and information supplied by ethical breeders, by hamster-focused organizations, by small animal rescues, by the hamster community, by peer-reviewed articles, and by my own experience. While I'd prefer to have proper, academic sources for everything, I couldn't easily access that information.

Not everything we know about Syrian hamster care has come from studies or academic papers. A lot of it comes from ethical breeders, who care for many hamsters in all their stages of life and of various health and development.

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