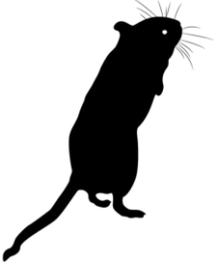


GERBILS

~by Dr. Kay Bishop; APS of Durham Veterinarian



Basic Information

Life Span: Up to 5 years.

Personality: Gerbils are inquisitive, playful, curious and friendly animals and fun to watch. They don't keep still for very long as they are always digging, climbing, sniffing, running, chewing and investigating everything around them with a fearless nature. They are easy to take care for compared to many other pets. If you prefer a calmer and more snuggly pet, a gerbil will probably not be a good match for you.

Behavior: Mongolian gerbils are not nocturnal although they are active at night on and off. If you are bothered by their chewing/burying activities at night, don't keep them in your bedroom.

You will see your gerbil:

- Thumping: (jumping up and down rapidly on their hind legs) – when alarmed or excited or to warn other gerbils
- Chirping: (bird-like chirping noises) – when happy or annoyed
- Digging/burrowing: (digging in the corner or on the wall of their tank) – this is their natural instinct to burrow - they are not trying to escape. In the wild, gerbils live in a complex system of tunnels and burrows, so it is nice to allow the gerbils room to burrow in their enclosure. A deep layer of wood shavings combined with hay will provide some room for burrowing.
- Grooming: Gerbils will often groom themselves and one another. As well as the benefits to their coats, this is an important part of their social interaction. They also appreciate being offered sand for taking a dust bath (they will roll and play in the sand, which helps clean their fur).
- Chewing/Gnawing: Gerbils, like most other rodents, are avid chewers and will chew their way through cage furnishings somewhat regularly. It is important to provide appropriate chewing toys to allow the gerbils to indulge this natural activity.
- Scent Marking: Gerbils have a scent gland on their abdomen, and this is used to mark items in their territory.

Play Time: You can also give them play time outside the cage. Make sure the area is completely “gerbil” proof (away from stuff they shouldn't chew) and they can't escape. The bath tub (empty of course) is one option. Just put a rubber mat, old blankets or foam mats on the bottom, add cardboard boxes and other toys. Another option is a play pen which you can easily make yourself out of 4 wooden plywood boards. Always supervise your gerbils during play time since they might be able to jump out.

Handling: When you first get your friend, give him a day to get used to his new home. Then start with putting your hand into the tank/cage and let the gerbils explore you. If they try to “taste” (nip) you, pull your hand away slowly. The next step would be putting a few treats (like sunflower seeds) in the palm of your hand and let them take it off your hand. They will soon associate that yummy treats come from your hand. Interact with your gerbils daily and you will soon gain their trust. When picking up a gerbil it's best to scoop him up with both hands. If you use one hand, put your thumb and fingers around his waist and support his feet with your other hand. NEVER pick up a gerbil by his tail! It is uncomfortable for your furry friend and the tail can actually “de-glove” which means the skin can slip off, leaving bone exposed and requiring the tail to be amputated. Since gerbils love to chew don't put anything near them you don't want to get chewed or anything that might be harmful to them.

Never punish your gerbil. Don't squeeze, flick his nose, yell or pick him up by his tail. Be patient!

Housing

Aquarium: The best option is a big tank (20 gallon for 2 gerbils, 30 gallon for 3 gerbils etc.) with a secure mesh lid.

Bedding: Good litter choices are Carefresh, Cell-Sorb Plus or Aspen. Fill it up to about 3". Never use pine or cedar bedding since the phenols are toxic to all small animals. Stay away from cloth, blankets and newspaper. Remove soiled bedding, droppings and any uneaten food (fruit/veggies) every day. Clean the cage completely once a week by replacing dirty bedding and scrubbing the bottom of the cage with warm water and a liquid soap that's safe for animals. Be sure everything's dry before adding fresh bedding.

Hide Box: Gerbils need a nest box to feel secure; they will hide out in it and use for sleeping. A sturdy wood or ceramic nest box is preferable to plastic since the plastic will quickly be destroyed by chewing. The wood will likely get chewed too but tends to last a little longer. Of course you can also give them cardboard boxes for hiding. Small Clay or ceramic flower pots are another possibility.

Things to Chew and Play: Gerbils love to chew. There are many cheap ways to keep your gerbil happy: cardboard boxes, Kleenex boxes, empty toilet paper rolls, cork, untreated wood, untreated wicker baskets, PVC pipes, ladders, a running wheel (must have a solid surface!).

Sand: Since gerbils are desert animals, they like taking sand baths. Get a heavy crock and add chinchilla sand (don't use chinchilla dust or children's play sand).

GERBILS

~by Dr. Kay Bishop; APS of Durham Veterinarian

Diet

There are many food brands available. Make sure it's specifically made for gerbils and the fat content is low.

- **Seed Mix:** Seed mix consists of loose mixes of seeds, sometimes with pellets or dried vegetables added. Most of these will be nutritionally balanced, but only if your gerbil eats everything in the mix. The downside: many gerbils will pick out their favorite bits and leave the rest, which can lead to a dietary imbalance if there are components your gerbils consistently avoid.
- **Pellets:** Another option is "Pellets" (f.e. "Oxbow"). They are smaller than "lab blocks" and have the advantage of being nutritionally balanced. A combination of both seed mix and pellets is a good idea.
- **Fresh Vegetables:** Food ideas: broccoli, carrots, apples, lettuce, berries, parsley, cucumber, cauliflower
- **Treats:** For occasional treats you can feed small amounts of fruit and veggies, whole-wheat corn flakes, puffed rice, puffed corn, unsalted sunflower seeds and pumpkin seeds, mealworms, whole grain bread, raisins etc. Use your imagination but also your judgment.
- **Forbidden Foods:** rhubarb, raw kidney beans or onions, raw potatoes, Kidney Beans, Onions, Chocolate, Sweets, Avocado, Garlic

Medical Care

Gerbils are pretty hardy pets however there are a few illnesses you should be aware of and signs you should watch out for:

- **Respiratory Infections:** You will hear a clicking noise. This is very contagious among gerbils.
- **Scent Gland Tumors:** Check for lumps
- **Broken Tail**
- **Diarrhea:** Diarrhea can be food-related or an indication of Tyzzer's disease, which is highly contagious.
- **Mites:** Look for scabs and/or bald spots, excessive scratching. They usually come from infested food or bedding. Your gerbils need to be treated for mites. Freezing food and bedding (at least 72 hours before use) should kill any parasites in the bags.
- **Overgrown Teeth:** A gerbil's teeth should be yellowish/orange.
- **Seizures:** Seizures are a common disease problem in gerbils, with 20-40% of gerbils affected. It is an inherited trait, with members of some family lines at an almost 100% risk of developing these seizures. Seizures usually start at 2 months of age and may become more severe until the animal reaches 6 months of age. At that time, some gerbils may outgrow the tendency to have these seizures.
- **Strokes:** Elderly gerbils can get strokes. The animal will lose use of part of its body and fall over or have problems moving. They have the most amazing ability to get over strokes so make sure that your pet can reach food and water and keep him warm. Again you should seek advice from a vet as strokes and middle ear problems sometimes have similar symptoms.

Shopping List

- Aquarium:** 20 gallon aquarium (or bigger) with secure metal and mesh lid
- Bedding:** Carefresh, Kaytee Aspen Fresh or Cell-Sorb Plus (to fill cage 3" deep). Never use pine or cedar – it is toxic to all small pets.
- Food:** "Healthy Handfuls" by Oxbow (pellets), Gerrie Gerbil mix by "Carefresh" or "Bonanza" Gerbil mix by "LM Animal Farms". There are other brands available. Just make sure it is specifically made for gerbils (watch for low fat content)
- Also provide fresh fruit and vegetables in small amounts occasionally. Treats (in moderation!): whole wheat cornflakes, unsalted sunflower seeds, unsweetened banana chips, puffed rice, puffed kamut, puffed corn, rolled oats, whole-wheat cheerios, pumpkin seeds
- Food Dish:** Small Ceramic Crock
- Water Bottle:** 8oz (fresh water every 2-3 days), glass water bottles are a good idea if gerbils chew plastic ones.
- Sand Bath:** "Chinchilla Bath Sand" by Super Pet (not "Dust" – it's too dusty and can cause breathing problems). Do not use children's play sand.
- Hide Box:** Wood or cardboard (will eventually get chewed up)
- Toys:** Exercise wheel, Empty toilet and kitchen paper rolls, Cardboard boxes (stay away from cereal boxes), Kleenex boxes, Paper plates, Grocery paper bags, Label rolls, Apple sticks or other untreated wood PVC pipes, wooden tubes or paper rolls to run through or hide, untreated wicker baskets, Rocks (cleaned and disinfected), coconut shells

