

# HAMSTERS

~by Dr. Kay Bishop; APS of Durham Veterinarian

## Basic Information

There are roughly 25 species collectively known as "hamsters," of which there are three major groups that are kept as pets: the larger Syrian Hamster, Dwarf Hamsters, and Chinese Hamsters. They've become popular pets due to their ease of handling, cute looks, and ease of bonding with their owner.

Hamsters can come in many different shapes, sizes and colors. They can have short fur or long fur. Typically they range from 2 to 7 inches in length, depending on the species, and have stout bodies paired with short legs and very short tails (although Chinese Hamsters have longer tails).

**Lifespan:** Hamsters typically live no more than 2-3 years in captivity.

**Behavior:** Syrian Hamsters are generally solitary animals and should not be kept together in a single enclosure. Dwarf Hamsters of the same species and sex, on the other hand, are typically able to be kept together. Hamsters are not strictly nocturnal, but do spend most of the day burrowed only to come out in the hours before dusk.

## Housing

**Aquarium or Cage:** An aquarium or wire cage will work for hamsters. If choosing an aquarium, choose one with a securely-fitted mesh top. If choose a wire cage, choose one that has bars spaced close enough together that your hamster(s) cannot escape, typically 1/2". Enclosures should be 12x24x12 or larger.

## Diet

**Food:** "Healthy Handfuls" pellets by Oxbow or Mazuri Hamster and Gerbil Diet are appropriate staple food choices. Fresh vegetables in small amounts should be occasionally given, as well as occasional fruit for Syrian hamsters (but not Dwarf).

## Shopping List

- Aquarium or Cage:** 15 gallon aquarium or larger with secure metal mesh lid. Wire cage: 12x24x12 or larger, provide ramps. Make sure the space between the bars is small so the hamster can't squeeze through (usually 1/2" spacing)! The enclosure should be placed away from direct sunlight and drafts. Small plastic "Habitrails" are NOT suitable.
- Bedding:** Sunseed Fresh World, Carefresh, Kaytee Aspen Fresh or Cell-Sorb Plus. Provide enough bedding for digging and nesting. Never use pine or cedar – it is toxic to all small pets.
- Hide Box:** A hard plastic igloo, wooden nesting box or cardboard houses (will eventually get chewed up), provide unscented toilet paper or paper towels for nesting material (avoid fluffy material like cotton balls), small amounts of Timothy Hay
- Exercise Wheel:** Solid surface and large enough for full grown, adult sized hamster (usually 8-9" diameter); do not use wheels with metal bars—they can cause foot and leg injuries.
- Toys:** hard plastic tubes, wooden ladders, Empty toilet and kitchen paper rolls, Cardboard boxes, Kleenex boxes, Paper plates, Grocery paper bags, Label rolls, Apple sticks or other untreated wood (bird toys), PVC pipes, wooden tubes or paper rolls to run through or hide, untreated wicker baskets, empty egg cartons, etc.
- Food Dishes:** Small ceramic crocks (2-3)
- Water Bottle:** 8oz (fresh water every 2-3 days), glass water bottles are a good idea if hamsters chew on plastic ones.

