

Mongolian Gerbil

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff



Though most active at night, the Mongolian gerbil, *Meriones unguiculatus*, is unlike other nocturnal animals. Instead of strictly sleeping during the day and being awake during the night, this popular pet's day is divided into varying cycles of rest and sociable, playful activity. One of eighty-seven known species of gerbils worldwide, the Mongolian gerbil can become quite tame and has a naturally curious disposition. In fact, when they discover a new object or sound, this gerbil is more likely to investigate than run away and hide - which is probably why they are the most common species of pet gerbils and have been since the mid 1800's.

INTERESTING FACTS

Characteristics: Gerbils are members of the rodent family. They are naturally social creatures. As such, they are best kept in same sexed pairs or groups although adult females may fight. Within the group, each gerbil will wrestle, play, and groom one another. They communicate with each other through a series of high-pitched squeaks and also pound both hind feet on the ground in varying patterns and loudness, which is known as "thumping." Though males are slightly larger than females, the average adult gerbil measures about four inches long, with a four inch long tail. They can weigh anywhere between two and five ounces. The average life span is two to three years, though some cases of a gerbil living over five years have been reported.

Appearance: Because of their small size, people often confuse gerbils for mice. However, gerbils are quite different from their rodent cousins. Gerbils typically have a tail equal in length to their bodies. The tail is covered in fur and ends with a tuft of fur. Their eyes are either dark black or deep red. The most common Mongolian gerbil is agouti colored, where each hair is banded with gray, yellow, and black stripes and the underbelly is off-white. However, numerous color variations have been bred over the years, including black, blue, lilac, slate, Himalayan white, nutmeg, honey, golden, or cream. In addition, numerous spotted, lightened, or combined variations are also available.

#1 Preventable Health Problem: Like all rodents, a gerbil's upper incisors continually grow throughout his lifetime. To help keep your gerbil's teeth clean and worn, offer him [chew toys](#) and [chew treats](#). In addition, because a gerbil's tail is so long and fragile, it can easily become injured. To help prevent this, ensure his cage is free from any sharp or protruding edges on which his tail could become caught. Handle the gerbil gently and avoid hanging onto the tail.

Preferences: Gerbils are kings of digging and burrowing. In the wild, they will dig a massive system of tunnels and rooms deep in the ground. To satisfy this instinctive need for security and nesting, ensure your chosen [cage](#) has at least two to three inches of suitable [bedding](#). In addition, offer your gerbil a shredable [nesting material](#) that he can pull apart and use as he fancies.

Best Features: It is fascinating to watch how these sociable and curious animals interact with each other. Though they will groom themselves, gerbils often lay belly-up on the ground in front of a companion for grooming. They also playfully wrestle, box, and chase each other around their home. But a gerbil's most unique trait is how he "thumps" his hind feet on the ground to communicate with his gerbil companions. Sometimes loud and fast, sometimes quiet and slow, each thumping pattern signifies a different meaning. And once one gerbil begins to thump, all others in the area will usually join in; together a group of Mongolian gerbils can create a symphony of noise often unusual to such small creatures.

Housing: Native to the arid, desert regions of Mongolia, gerbils are active animals who can jump fairly high. Therefore, their [cage](#) needs to be large enough to encourage their playful activity and house at least one other gerbil as a companion, while also being secure. Since gerbils are also notorious chewers, his [cage](#) and [accessories](#), [food dish](#) and [water bottle](#), and [toys](#) need to be continually monitored for damage and instantly removed from his environment if damage is visible. Also, gerbils need at least two to three inches of suitable [bedding](#) to encourage their need to dig and burrow.

Diet: Though gerbils are typical desert animals who, in the wild, obtain most of their needed water from the foods they eat, caged gerbils still need a daily, fresh source of [water](#). Their [diet](#) should consist of quality, pellet foods. Occasional small [treats](#), a very small amount of seed, and small amounts of fresh fruits and vegetables can also be offered.