Habitat Tips for Hamsters

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Cages

Cages for hamsters should be at least 19 x 19 inches square and 6 inches high. The best cages have a solid base; do NOT use a cage with a wire mesh floor, as this can injure your hamster's feet. There are generally three types of cages: wire mesh, glass, and plastic.

- wire cages have the advantage of allowing the hamster to use the wire itself as a way to have climbing exercise and offer ideal ventilation. The horizontal bars should be 1/2 to 3/4 of an inch apart. Ideal wire cages have a detachable base for easy cleaning.
- glass cages (aquarium tanks) have the advantage of being easily cleaned, but have poor ventilation and do not, in themselves, provide a way to exercise.
- plastic cages are commercially available with multiple built-in tunnels and toys, but are generally the most difficult cages to clean. In addition, depending upon design, ventilation may be less than optimum.

Bedding

Hamsters like to burrow, so bedding should be deep. Good choices of bedding include recycled paper pellets and wood shavings (NOT cedar). The bedding should be changed weekly. Most hamsters use one corner of their cage as a toilet area, and this area should be cleaned more frequently.

Temperature

Golden Hamsters of either gender (unlike other kinds of hamsters) hibernate if the temperature drops suddenly, becoming less active below 60°F. If the temperature has dropped below 60°F and your hamster appears to be barely moving, other than whiskers twitching and very slowly breathing, he may well have begun to hibernate. Because this involves physiological changes, do not attempt to bring your hamster around or out of hibernation by handling or elevating the temperature markedly. Instead, raise the temperature by 5°F every 6 to 8 hours until the temperature reaches 70-75°F. If you turn the thermostat in your home below 60°F for sleeping, cover the cage with a padded thermal cover which should keep the cage environment warm enough overnight. Hibernation is a normal physiological activity which can benefit your small pet, but there is a right and a wrong way to "hibernate" your pet. If you are interested in allowing your hamster to hibernate, be sure to get proper information about how to stimulate this interesting phenomenon, as well as how to bring them out of hibernation.

Hamsters can be stressed by high temperatures, so keep your hamster in a cool part of the house in the summer.

Nesting materials

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Hamsters prefer to have a nesting house where they can sleep undisturbed during the day. Provide nesting material such as plain facial tissue, soft paper towels, commercial cotton bedding, or other soft materials. The nesting material should be cleaned out every 4-6 weeks; cleaning more often may stress your hamster. Portions of the material may be removed if soiled. Since hamsters may bury food in the nesting material, it should be checked routinely, and any hoarded food should be removed.

Toys and exercise

Hamsters love to chew and burrow, so this will give you clues as to what toys and exercise accessories will be most appropriate. An **untreated** piece of 4 x 4 works well. Drilling large holes through the wood will provide tunnels as well. Hamsters also like to play with, and chew, cardboard tubes from toilet paper and paper toweling. Larger cardboard boxes can also be good toys, but like the tubes, they will not last long and you will need to replace them often. Specific chew toys for small pets are also available.

Almost all hamsters will use an exercise wheel which should be at least 5-1/2 inches in diameter. Unfortunately, they use the wheel at night, and a squeaky wheel has kept many a hamster owner awake for hours. A little mineral oil on the axle will help. PVC pipe and commercially available tunnels can also provide good exercise.

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