

# Gerbils

LIFESPAN: 3-5 YEARS

## Description

The Mongolian gerbil is the common gerbil we keep as pets. 'Gerbil' is an umbrella term for a wide variety of sub-members to the gerbil family. They derive from the semi deserts of Mongolia, and were brought to the US for research. They are hardy pets, but should still be handled with care. Gerbils should never be grabbed by the tail to avoid injury.

## Housing

A popular choice for housing is a glass aquarium. Provide your gerbil/s with the largest aquarium possible, as they love to dig and build tunnels. The tank should be equipped with a screen lid and can be secured with screen clips. Gerbils have powerful back legs and can jump past tank walls.

As suggested by the American Gerbil Society, following is the general minimum space requirements:

10-gallon tank 1 or 2 gerbils

15-gallon tank 3 gerbils

20-gallon tank 4 gerbils

30-gallon tank 6 gerbils

**Avoid dusty bedding in tanks.**

Aspen, tissue, or paper bedding is the best option for bedding.

**Avoid cedar, pine, corn-cob, or straw bedding.**

Your gerbil tank should include: feed dish, a water bottle, thick bedding for tunneling, chew toys/hideouts, and a proper running wheel.



## Diet

A quality commercial seed or lab block diet (or a mix of both) specified for gerbils will suffice.

Gerbils may also have treats in the form of fresh produce, herbs, etc.

**Vegetables:** Carrots, Celery (small pieces to avoid strings), Cilantro, Cucumber, Green Beans, Peas, Cooked Potatoes, and Sweet Potatoes.

**Fruit (remove seeds/pits):** Apple, Kiwi, Mango, Melon, Mint, Peach, Plums, Strawberries

**Other safe treats:** Babyfood (no onion/garlic), Bread, Cereal, Cashews, Chicken/Turkey (cooked, unseasoned), Cheese, Crackers (unsalted), Dog Biscuits, Egg (scrambled or boiled), or Mealworms.

**Avoid: Onions, Chocolate, and Garlic.**

## Grooming

Gerbils should not receive water baths or wipe-downs unless absolutely necessary. However, they can have bath-sand that is specially formulated for gerbils and other small rodents for this purpose. (Not to be confused with chinchilla dust bath.)

Gerbils should be provided with a proper exercise wheel for in-cage exercise. It should be solid surface and large enough for your gerbil. Gerbils love to run on their wheels and they are active creatures – so wheels are essential.

## One or Two?

Gerbils usually do well in small groups or pairs.

However, it is best to keep females in pairs, and not introduce any additional females once a pair is established. Males can live in pairs or small groups if given adequate living space.

It is better to introduce young gerbils, or a young gerbil to an adult.

## Health

It is important to find a vet experienced in gerbils, as well as an emergency vet for after-hours care. Gerbils do not require routine veterinary care, but can fall sick or injured just as any other pet. Gerbils can decline in health quickly, so if you suspect them to be ill – see a vet as soon as possible.

More common health ailments to watch out for include:

### • Upper Respiratory Infections (URI)

Avoid placing the cage in an area that is cold or damp or with drafts. Do not house in a place with smoking, burning candles, or air fresheners.

If you notice your gerbil hunching over, clicking noises, or with a ruffled coat – it's time to see a veterinarian.

### • Scent Gland Tumors

Most commonly found in older gerbils. The scent gland is a bare patch of textured skin on the gerbil's belly.

If you notice a lump on this scent gland – see a vet. It will get worse if left untreated.

### • Strokes & Seizures

Unfortunately, strokes and seizures are not unheard of in gerbils. Strokes may cause paralysis down one side of the gerbil. In this case, to attempt recovery, it is important to assure your gerbil is receiving full nutrition through food and water. (A recovery food known as Critical Care by Oxbow is helpful in this situation.)

Gerbils may suffer from multiple strokes and eventually pass away due to this, but a full recovery is not impossible. In the case of a seizure, more commonly found in young gerbils, you may notice your gerbil freeze and twitch.

Seizures can be brought on by over-excitement or upsetting stimulus. It is best to leave your gerbil in its cage to settle if you are present when a seizure occurs. A strong seizure can be fatal, but often only requires the gerbil to calm.

If your gerbil does not seem 'itself' after a few minutes, a vet visit to assure good health is your best option.

Signs of stroke may include a tilted head and off-balance and/or leaning walk.

### • Red Noses

Red noses are often mistaken for fighting or blood (due to mucus color.) More often than not, red noses are simply due to allergies. If you notice a red nose, and are using pine or cedar bedding, remove it immediately and switch to a safer paper or aspen bedding.

If your gerbil is housed in a cage – balding and irritation of the nose may be caused by rubbing cage bars.

### • Malocclusion

Malocclusion, or over-grown teeth, can present itself in gerbils. This is a condition that causes rapid overgrowth of the teeth and can result in severe pain, unable to eat, and eventually death if left untreated.

It is important to see a veterinarian to trim teeth and maintain your gerbil if you notice overgrown teeth, or signs of malocclusion.

If you notice your gerbil not eating, losing weight, acting lethargic, or see overgrown teeth (which may not always be visible) – see a vet as soon as possible.

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