

Brant County SPCA



GERBILS

GENERAL CARE INFORMATION

General Information

Although gerbils are relatively easy to look after, once ill they can deteriorate quickly; proper care will go a long way to preventing this. The average lifespan is 3-5 years, although they can live longer. Gerbils are sociable animals and will live happily in pairs or groups. Gerbils are best introduced at a young age particularly males. They may squabble a little when first introduced but the squabbling often sounds worse than it actually is and is just their way of establishing who is the boss. They are best left to sort this out unless serious injury or prolonged non-stop fighting occurs. Occasionally a very dominant gerbil may not accept living with another but this is rare.

Housing

Buying a cage is the largest expense in keeping a gerbil and it is important to provide the best and largest cage for your gerbil than you can. The most common type of gerbil care has a plastic base and a rigid coated wire top. The wire top can be unclipped from the base making it easy to get the gerbil out or to clean the cage. Similar cages with two or more floor levels are also available with ladders, which allow the gerbil to climb up and down between the different levels.

Aquariums can also be used to house a gerbil. These are draught proof and relatively cheap but glass aquariums can be awkward to clean because of their heavy weight. Plastic aquariums however are much easier to clean being lighter but the sides tend to become scratched after a time. It is always best to ensure a lid is fixed to an aquarium – this will prevent the gerbil from escaping. A wire mesh top is preferable to a solid lid with air holes as this prevents the build up of condensation.

Floor Covering/Bedding

A covering is required for the floor of the cage to provide a comfortable surface for the gerbil and also to soak up urine. The most common type of floor covering available is wood shavings – fine sawdust should be avoided as this can cause irritation to the eyes. Cedar wood shaving (usually distinguished by a red tint) should not be used as the phenols they contain can cause severe irritations in gerbils. Pine shavings cause fewer problems than Cedar and kiln dried Pine can be used without problems. Any form of scented shavings should be avoided as these can also cause irritation. Wood shavings from hardwoods such as Aspen or small animal litter made from wood pulp (such as Carefresh) are the safest form of floor covering to use.

A gerbil will appreciate some bedding material with which to build a “nest”. Bedding material can be bought in pet stores but any fluffy cotton wood type bedding should be avoided as this can cause harm if eaten by the gerbil. Soft paper bedding is best, as this causes no harm if eaten and is easily broken. It is not necessary to buy bedding as this can be provide much cheaper simply by taking undyed and unscented toilet paper or paper towel and tearing it into strips for your gerbil.

The cage should be cleaned twice weekly by removing the gerbil from the cage and throwing away all floor coverings, bedding and food. The gerbil will appreciate it if some of its old bedding is placed in the clean cage along with some fresh bedding.

Housing Accessories

When awake gerbils can be very lively, therefore most gerbils will appreciate an exercise wheel. Many of the gerbil cages available today already have exercise wheels fitted but if the cage that you bought does not then is it also possible to buy freestanding wheels, which can be placed in a cage or aquarium.

Any wheel provided should have a solid back and a solid running surface. A gerbil can slip on a wheel, which has a runged running surface, and if it gets its foot or tail caught between the rungs as the wheel is turning it can injure itself. Wheels that have open back or front and back with a bar across the diameter can also injure the gerbil if the gerbil should stick it head out while running.

There are various “houses” for sale in pet stores and a gerbil will use these for nesting in. However, it is best to remove the lid of the house as this will help prevent condensation building up within the house. A sand bath can also be provided by placing a suitable sized dish in the cage filled with either fine sand or chinchilla dust. Old cardboard tubes or toilet roll tubes can be provided for the gerbil and it will enjoy using it as something to climb through, on or nest in as well as chewing it to pieces. Wood gnaws are available in pet stores or you can provide your own by supplying the gerbil with a piece of apple branch. These provide the gerbil with something on which to gnaw on in order to keep its teeth trim.

Diet

A food dish is not absolutely vital – a gerbil will be just as happy to eat its food from the floor and actually sprinkling food on the floor is more natural for the gerbil and provides the gerbil with extra stimulation in foraging for its food. However, using a food dish does enable you to use this as a measure of food you are giving and it is easier to see how much food the gerbil is eating.

Each gerbil will have different tastes and not all gerbils like the same things to eat. However, it is important to know what can and cannot be fed to gerbils to avoid harming the gerbil and to help keep the gerbil healthy.●

Most pet stores sell mixes specifically designed for gerbils. These usually consist of grains, seeds, pellets and dried vegetables. There are also rodent or gerbil pellets sold in some stores – these are compressed food pellets and although they are designed to meet a gerbil's nutritional requirements they do not give the gerbil any variety. A gerbil mix or pellets should form the main part of the gerbil's diet but may be supplemented by other foods. Food mixes specifically designed for other animals should not be given as these may not be suitable to meet your gerbil's dietary requirements and may even harm your gerbil. Any changes in diet, even changing to a different gerbil mix, should be made gradually as a sudden change in diet can cause your gerbil to become ill. Pet stores also sell vitamin drops, which can be added to water and are beneficial to the gerbil.

Although the gerbil mix will provide the gerbil with a good basic diet, gerbils also enjoy fruit and vegetables. However, it is important that fruits and vegetables should be introduced to a gerbil's diet gradually as a sudden large amount of fruit or vegetables can cause diarrhea. To begin with the gerbil should only be given a small piece of fruit or vegetable one or twice a week and over a period of weeks this gradually can be increased to larger amounts fed every day. If at any time, the gerbil shows signs of diarrhea all feeding of fruit and vegetables should stop until the gerbil has recovered and then gradually re-introduce into the diet.

Fruit and vegetables that are safe to feed a gerbil are:

- Apples (seedless)
- Broccoli
- Carrots
- Cauliflower leaves and stalks
- Cucumber
- Lettuce – small amounts
- Parsley

Other treats that can be fed to your gerbil include:

- Biscuits
- Boiled potatoes
- Bread (fresh or stale)
- Breakfast cereals (low fat)
- Cheese (small amounts)
- Currents
- Dog biscuits
- Egg (scrambled or hard boiled)
- Mealworms
- Raisins
- Sultanas
- Toast

Fruit and vegetables that should **NOT** be fed are:

- Kidney Beans (raw)
- Onion
- Potato (raw)
- Potato tops
- Rhubarb (raw)
- Rhubarb leaves
- Tomato leaves

NEVER FEED A GERBIL ANY OF THE FOLLOWING:

- **Chocolate**
- **Garlic**
- **Onions**
- **Rabbit Mix (containing antibiotics)**
- **Raw Kidney Beans**
- **Sweets**
- **Toffee**