

# Gerbils as Pets

## **Should I get one or two Gerbils?**

Gerbils are highly social colony animals and get miserable and depressed by themselves -- if you are not planning on breeding the best thing to do is to get two females or two males, preferably from the same litter. Two same-sex Gerbils will normally bond as closely as a mated pair and will be perfectly happy together.

## **What should I look for in a Gerbil?**

When you look at the Gerbils in the store the first thing to look for is curiosity. When you walk up to the cage they should come to see what is happening. (Of course, they might be sleeping, that is normal.) Handle the Gerbils. They will run when you try to catch them; make sure you pick them up by scooping them up with your two hands underneath the Gerbil. When picked up, the Gerbil should be curious and try to investigate, provided you have it in a stable position. The eyes should be large and clear, the fur soft, and the tail as long as the body with a tuft of fur at the end. The body should be well formed and stocky.

Make sure the Gerbil is not listless or has diarrhoea. This indicates a serious disease and might indicate that the store does not take care of its animals properly. Make sure the animal does not have a sore, red, or bleeding nose, which indicates an infection or allergy to the bedding in the cage - Dry or ruffled fur and runny or dull eyes are also indicators of a sick animal. Sometimes a healthy animal will be depressed if it has been alone for too long. If the Gerbil perks up when you handle it and the fur and eyes look good, then it is probably healthy.

## **What is the best housing for Gerbils?**

One of the better and least expensive forms of housing is a simple aquarium of glass or plastic. For a pair of Gerbils a 15" by 12" by 10" tank is ideal. You may have to construct your own Gerbil proof lid but this is easily done with aviary wire from any DIY store. Open wire cages like those sold for Hamsters are best avoided as Gerbils have a tendency to kick the bedding out through the gaps while they dig and will often injure their nose by gnawing on the bars.

## **What do I feed my Gerbils?**

You will probably find your Gerbils are not particularly fussy. The best thing to do is to provide a basic diet of a seed mix such as Hamster food. You can supplement this with a very small amount of fresh fruit and vegetables – Gerbils do not need much fresh food and too much can make them ill. Gerbils will also eat insects and in the wild invertebrates are probably an important source of protein. As a treat Gerbils love Sunflower seeds but it is probably wise to limit these as they are high in fat. Gerbils also love the small seeds such as millet, that are in budgie and canary mix and these are probably better for them.

## **Is it true that I don't need to give Gerbils water?**

No. While Gerbils come from dry steppe and semi-desert and do not drink much it is important that water is always available to them. The best thing to do is to use a small gravity-fed water bottle and refill it every time they empty it -- the small bottle will keep the water fresher.

## **How often do I need to clean out my Gerbils?**

Gerbils do not smell so they do not need cleaning out as often as mice or rats. It is rarely necessary to clean Gerbils out more than once a week or fortnight.

## **Should I give my Gerbils something to chew on?**

Yes. Gerbils, like most rodents have a strong chewing instinct. They can keep their teeth at the proper length by grinding them together unless the teeth do not line up properly, but still instinctively chew on anything they can get their teeth on. Cardboard or shop bought chew sticks are OK, but the cheapest and best thing to do is to use branches and bark from trees in your area. Fruit tree prunings are ideal. Pine cones are a great hit too.

## **Can my Gerbils play with my other pets?**

This isn't really a good idea. Whilst gerbils are not afraid of large predators like cats and dogs, these animals can easily injure or kill a gerbil. Even contact between different pets of a similar size can be a major mistake. Gerbils tend to be extremely aggressive towards other small rodents. They will normally attack and attempt to kill hamsters, rats and mice.

## **Is it easy to put two Gerbils together?**

Before gerbils are about 8 weeks they will normally except the company of other Gerbils. Unfortunately, after that age it gets more difficult to introduce them. Males are much more easy to introduce to one another. They will normally accept a Gerbil that is under 8 weeks old and be very protective towards it. Females on the other hand can be very difficult to introduce other Gerbils to. This is because females are much more competitive and territorial than males are. Introducing adult gerbils often requires that special steps are taken. For example, many people use what is called "The Split Cage Method". This means that the gerbils have to live in the same tank or cage with a barrier between them. For several days the gerbils need to be swapped between the two halves of the tank until they get used to the scent of the other gerbil in "their" territory. Gerbils should never be introduced to a group of adult Gerbils. Even a simple pair will often fall out if another Gerbil is introduced as it disrupts the dominance hierarchy that the Gerbils have already established.

## **How long do Gerbils live?**

Gerbils normally live longer than mice, rats, hamsters and other small pets. Typically they die shortly before they reach the age of three. However, some gerbils will live significantly longer and may get as old as five.

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