

Caring for your pet rodent

Rodents are unique pets because of their small size, and they require special care. Here are some tips on how to house and feed your pet rodent to keep it healthy and happy.

HOUSING

Most pet rodents feel at home in a 10- to 20-gal aquarium or a cage specifically designed for pet rodents. Avoid wooden cages because rodents love to chew and can damage and then escape from these cages. Also avoid wire-bottom cages because a rodent's feet can get caught between the wires, causing an injury. You can leave the top of the cage open if your pet can't escape by climbing the sides of the cage or atop objects in the cage and if other family pets can't get in and injure the rodent. Keep in mind that all pet rodents are masters of escape, so their cages must be escape-proof. Don't let a pet rodent have the run of the house because it might damage furniture or injure itself. Pet rodents can be handled outside the cage if you're careful, but young children should be supervised.

Because rodents like to burrow, provide a hiding place in the cage. You can use round, hollow objects available at pet stores; a clean, empty can (such as a frozen orange juice can with no exposed metal or rusty areas); or a cardboard paper towel or toilet paper roll. Pet rodents can quickly destroy cardboard, so you'll need to replace these items often.

Temperature and ventilation

Keep the temperature of the cage or aquarium and the surrounding area between 65 and 80 F. Higher temperatures can cause heat stress. Make sure the aquarium or cage is well-ventilated and draft-free.

Bedding material

Shredded paper towels, pelleted paper products, oat hulls, wheat grass, and wood shavings (other than pine or cedar) are the best bedding materials to use. Pine or cedar shavings are commonly used, but aren't recommended because they may cause health problems in rodents. Avoid sawdust, sand, and dirt, which are harder to keep clean. Whichever bedding material you choose, remember to change it at least once a week to prevent illness. Also discard any food that a hamster may have hoarded in a corner of its cage. Consult with your veterinarian on specific recommendations for cage cleaning if your pet is pregnant or if newborns are present.

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Toys

Cage toys can provide psychological stimulation as well as exercise for pet rodents. Tubes and mazes are popular, as are exercise wheels. Avoid open-track exercise wheels because a pet's feet can get caught between the rungs, causing fractures, especially in hamsters. Plastic wheels with no openings are safest. Clean cage toys once a week with soap and water or diluted bleach, and rinse thoroughly.

Multiple-pet housing

It's best to house pet rodents individually because this prevents problems such as aggressiveness, unwanted breeding, and cannibalism of the young. If it's necessary to put more than one rodent in the same enclosure, keep the following in mind:

- A male and female will likely mate if they are housed together, especially if they were paired at an early age.
- Different species (such as a rat and a mouse) should never be housed in the same cage or in the same area because one species may carry an infectious disease that could be fatal to the other. For example, rabbits may carry bacteria that can kill guinea pigs.



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- If a pet rodent has been housed alone, it's best not to put a new rodent in its cage because they're likely to fight. An exception is introducing breeding animals.

Here are some general guidelines about housing certain species together:

Guinea pigs—Guinea pigs can be housed together if necessary.

Hamsters—Hamsters are best housed individually. Sexually mature females are aggressive to each other and to males.

Mice—Male mice are usually housed alone but may be housed in groups if this is done when the pets are weaned. Female mice rarely fight and are often housed together. Newly assembled male groups, new males entering established territories, and mice previously housed alone are more likely to fight. If the animals fight, separate them.

Rats—Rats housed together since weaning rarely fight, so they can be housed in groups. Occasionally, females that have just given birth may fight with other females.

Gerbils—Gerbils should usually be housed individually. But if a male and a female bond before they are 8 weeks old, they may form a monogamous pair. Pairs shouldn't be separated.

DIET

About 85% to 90% of a pet rodent's diet should be rodent pellets. Don't

use rodent party mixes. They contain 50% or more nuts and seeds, which contain low amounts of protein and high amounts of fat. You can offer nuts and seeds as treats, but they should make up no more than 5% of a pet rodent's diet.

You can also feed fresh, well-cleaned vegetables and, once or twice a week, a small amount of fruit to pet rodents. Leafy green vegetables (except lettuce or celery, which are of little nutritional value) and yel-

low and orange vegetables are best. Vegetables should make up no more than 10% of a pet rodent's diet.

low and orange vegetables are best. You might also provide hay (a handful once a day, depending on the size of the pet) as a source of fiber, which can prevent gastrointestinal problems such as diarrhea. Offer clover or grass hay or a small amount of alfalfa hay (not plain alfalfa).

Place food in heavy, spill-proof ceramic crocks or in feeders that attach to the cage. Make sure fresh water is available 24 hours a day in sipper tubes or spill-proof crocks. Replace the water and inspect the tubes every day for blockage that may develop if a pet spits food or pushes bedding into the sipper tube.

An important nutrition note for guinea pig owners: Guinea pigs need an external source of vitamin C because they cannot produce it on their own. Feed them only guinea pig pellets (not regular rodent chow), which are supplemented with vitamin C. Keep in mind that the nutritive value of vitamin C disappears from the pellets within 90 days of milling (not 90 days from purchase), so keep a fresh supply on hand. Because it is impossible to tell when pellets were milled, you should also supplement your guinea pig's regular diet with fresh vegetables such as kale, broccoli, dandelion greens, and small amounts of cabbage. And add vitamin C to your

A REMINDER...

Rodents hide illness well. Once you notice a problem, the illness may have already been present for several days or weeks. So it's important to watch your pet carefully and seek veterinary care at the first sign of illness, even if it seems mild.

Information provided by Shawn P. Messonnier, DVM, Paus and Claus Animal Hospital, 2145 W. Park Blvd., Plano, TX 75075.

Important Facts About Pet Rodents*

	Life Expectancy (years)	Average Weight (grams)	Breeding Age (days)	Gestation (days)
Guinea Pigs	4-8	750	90-150	59-72
Hamsters	1-3	125	48-56	15-18
Mice	1-3	40	42-49	17-21
Rats	1-3	350	90-110	20-22
Gerbils	2-4	90	70-90	24-26

*Adapted from Messonnier, S.: *Exotic Pets: A Veterinary Guide for Owners*. Wordware Publishing, Plano, Texas, 1995; p 88.