

HAMSTER COLLEGE 101 - Crash Course for CT ACOs

SPECIES OF PET HAMSTERS



5 different species as pets, very generally separated into two main types: **Syrian**/"teddy bear" hamsters and "**Dwarf**" hamsters:

- I. **Syrian hamsters** - bigger, "non-dwarfs", often called teddy bear, golden, black bear, panda bear, fancy, standard, and various other things depending on color, fur length.
 - o 6 – 8" long; various colors and fur lengths.
 - o Highly territorial, not communal at all with their own kind. **MUST LIVE ALONE** once mature or will fight, eventually to death. Total separation (even of same-sex siblings) must be done between 5 – 8 weeks of age (certainly as soon as fighting observed).
 - o Male pups need to be separated from mom and female siblings between 4 and 5 weeks of age to prevent pregnancies.
 - o Usually more strictly nocturnal/crepuscular than dwarf hamsters, though awake briefly during the day.
 - o To sex, check distance between genital opening and anus: male = farther apart (note: testicles not always distended/visible); female = very close together. If nipples are evident then can assume female (but can be hidden under fur so lack of visible nipples not definitive).
 - o Female hamsters go into heat/estrus every 4 days at which time they (female Syrian hamsters) usually give off a "funky"-smelling vaginal secretion.
 - o All Syrian hamsters have a scent gland on each hip, sometimes called hip spots, often not visible, especially if hamster is long-haired.
- II. "**Dwarf**" hamsters – 4 different species: 3 "true" Dwarf species and Chinese.
 - A. The "true" dwarfs:
 1. **Roborovski Dwarf** – shyest, tiniest, fastest, and often most difficult to socialize (often called "Robo"); 1.5 – 2.5" long

- 2. **Russian Campbell's Dwarf** – perhaps species more apt to be “nippy” than others but certainly not a general rule; 3 – 4.5” long
- 3. **Winter White Dwarf** (aka Siberian Winter White; Djungarian hamster) – sometimes more docile than other dwarfs; 3 – 4.5”
 - o Russian Campbell's and Winter Whites can hybridize, most “Winter Whites” are actually hybrids
 - o Various colors from dark grey, black with white, beige-grey, tan, white
 - o Sexing can be difficult, testicles are often not evident. Distance between genital opening and anus is the clue: male = farther part; female= very close together. If nipples are evident then can assume female (but can be hidden under fur). Abdominal scent gland is usually more obvious in males.
 - o The “true” Dwarfs *sometimes* can live together in same-sex pairs/groups but often/usually will need permanent separation due to fighting. Note: Play-fighting and serious fighting need to be differentiated.

B. Chinese hamster:

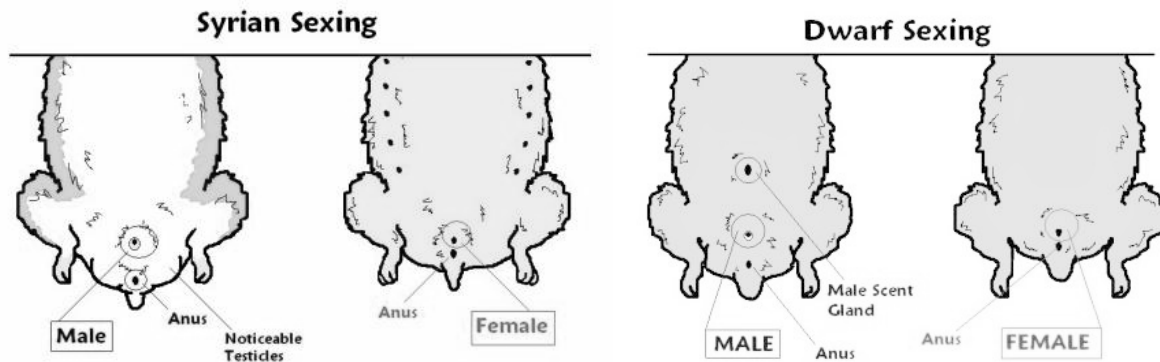
- o Often called “Chinese Dwarf” hamster; 3 – 4” long excluding tail.
- o Have a relatively long tail (0.5 – 1” long tail)
- o Long and lean, dark grey or dark grey and white.
- o **Most experts advise that Chinese Hamsters must live alone** (like the bigger Syrian hamsters).
- o Adult males have prominent scrotal sacs, easy to sex when mature. Note that Chinese hamsters often “wear” their testicles protruding from scrotal sac.

All Dwarfs and Chinese hamsters:

- o Unless they are all white, dwarf and Chinese hamsters have a dark stripe down their backs.
- o Dwarf and Chinese hamsters have a scent gland in the middle of their abdomens (where you'd expect a bellybutton to be), much more prominent in males.
- o Adult male hamsters should be removed from females immediately as hamsters can get pregnant within 24 hours of giving birth!
- o Male dwarf pups should be separated from mom and female siblings by about 2 months of age to prevent pregnancies
- o Lots of photos and information on all the dwarf/Chinese hamster species:
<https://harveyhams.weebly.com/dwarf-hamster-varieties.html>

An excellent video for identifying all the different hamster species:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PHo_aKlwR5Q



HANDLING HAMSTERS

- o Wash hands well before handling a hamster. Hamsters can catch colds from people which can quickly turn into life-threatening bacterial respiratory infection.
- o Also wash hands *between* handling different hamsters (other than those co-habiting) since extremely territorial .
- o Since hamsters have very poor eyesight and, thus, bad sense of height, and since can be suddenly jumpy, it's important to be sitting low to the floor, or on a bed, couch, or chair while handling to prevent tragic accidents.
- o Scooping method to pick up, both hands for security, fingers together (never with a hand held over the hamster's head with fingers apart which is very threatening, scary like the talons of a hawk or claws of other predator). Also, do not pick up by the scruff of the neck.
- o Hamsters may bite since they are prey in the wild and naturally terrified of being caught and eaten, so alternative pick-up method is to use a coffee mug, small empty box, Tupperware container, etc– a little treat inside the container will encourage the hamster to go in.
- o As mentioned, hamster pups should not be handled before 14 days old.

ESSENTIAL SUPPLIES

- o Housing/habitat/cage
- o Cage bedding
- o Water bottle
- o Food bowl/dish
- o Food
- o Hideaway/"igloo"
- o Exercise wheel
- o Chew sticks/blocks

Housing/habitat/cage

For a shelter situation where space may be at a premium:

- o For Syrian hamsters only, **Kaytee "Rat Home"** is acceptable. (Note: Bar spacing is ½ inch, too wide for dwarf hamsters.) Easy to clean and can be stacked. For example:

<https://www.petco.com/shop/en/petcostore/product/kaytee-rat-home>

o For dwarf and Chinese hamster species, a **10 gallon aquarium with a wire mesh lid** is acceptable short-term. (Cannot be stacked as the only ventilation is the lid.)

For adopters/other longer-term care:

Housing with much larger floor space, at least 360 sq. in., for both Syrian and dwarf (including Chinese) hamsters is preferable for adopters and other long-term care.

o For any hamster, a **20 gallon “Long” aquarium** (30 “ x 12”, i.e. 360 sq. in. floor space) is recommended minimum size though many experts now consider 450 sq. in. or even larger to be minimum.

o Homemade, large hamster “bin-cages” are highly recommended, consisting of a large, plastic storage bin (such as a Sterilite clear, plastic **110 or 116 quart storage bin** or the **34 gallon Ikea Samla bin**) with lid modified with large wire mesh insert panel for ventilation. Inexpensive, lightweight, easy to clean. Internet search “hamster bin cage” for examples, instructions, and tutorials.

o Please see “HAMSTER COLLEGE Graduate Course” for list and links for some online store-bought, readymade, acceptable hamster cages.

Do Not Use the following cages:

Crittertrails, Habitrails, and the like.

Any aquarium smaller than 10 gallons.

Any wire cage with bar spacing greater than 1/2 inch for Syrian hamsters and greater than about 1/3 in for dwarfs and Chinese (note that Roborovski Dwarfs do better in tanks or bin cages).

Any cages with wire/wire mesh floors or platforms.

Tall cages (such as those that are fine for expert climbing species such as rats).

Cage Bedding substrate – Hamsters make tunnels and burrows in the wild so need a cage substrate to live in; at least 4 - 5 inches deep. Recommended brands of bedding:

o **Kaytee Clean & Cozy** (any color is fine but make sure it’s **UNscented**)

o **Carefresh** (any color, as long as it's not one of the versions that's a "blend" with wood shavings)

o **Oxbow Pure Comfort**

o **Boxo Comfort Small Animal Bedding**

o **All Living Things Paper Pet Bedding** (sold at Petsmart only)

o **Aspen wood shavings** (though some hamsters are allergic; we prefer paper-/cellulose-based products such as the aforementioned)

Note: Additionally, giving the hamster some ripped-up unscented toilet paper in their hideaway will help keep them happy and cozy.

Do Not Use the following cage bedding:

Cedar / pine / “softwood” (or unspecified wood) bedding.

Any scented bedding.

Any “fluff”, cotton wool, and the like “nesting material” (provide ripped up toilet paper instead!).

Recycled (pelleted) news paper.

Any “dusty” bedding.

Any bedding with baking soda.

Any fabric, cloth, towels, etc (can cause a blockage if chewed and ingested).

Water bottle

- o Water bottles are preferred to dish because dishes can easily get tipped over or fouled with bedding, food, and droppings but a dish/bowl can be used in an emergency.
- o Water bottles in 4 oz to 8 oz size range are ideal (hamsters can have difficulty drinking from bottles larger than 8 oz).
- o Less likely to leak if filled all the way.
- o Detect air lock or other problem dispensing water freely by tapping end of drinking spout with clean finger.
- o Water bottles with slanted spouts seem to be easier to drink from than those with vertical spouts.
- o Should be rinsed out and water changed every 1 – 2 days.

Food bowl/dish

Dish can be ceramic, plastic, metal, or glass.

Food

- o Hamsters are omnivores, not vegetarians and they cannot survive eating hay.
Need: 17 – 22% protein; 4 – 7% fat; 6 – 15% fiber.
- o Hamsters generally need about a tablespoon of food per day.
- o Hamsters are self-limiting when it comes to food, can’t “overfeed”.
- o Too much food is better than too little – hamsters are hoarders and need to store some extra food to feel safe and secure.

Please see “HAMSTER COLLEGE Graduate Course” for additional options for hamster food including important information on diabetes in dwarf/Chinese species.

- o An acceptable rodent block-type food for hamsters (available at Petco) is **Mazuri Rat and Mouse Diet** (often considered too high in protein for rats and mice but good level for hamsters). For example:

<https://www.petco.com/shop/en/petcostore/product/mazuri-rat-and-mouse-food>

Note: Mazuri Rat and Mouse Diet contains molasses so potentially unsafe for diabetes-susceptible Russian Campbell’s Dwarf, Winter White Dwarf, and Chinese Hamster species.

Safe, healthy *supplemental* seed mixes (Note: **none of these are high enough in protein to be main staple**):

Hamsters need variety, including a seed mix and very small amount of fresh vegetables.

- o Acceptable *supplemental* seed mixes (too low in protein to be main staple):
Higgin’s Vita Garden – safe for all hamster species, available at Petco. For example:

<https://www.petco.com/shop/en/petcostore/product/higgins-vita-garden-hamster-and-gerbil-food>

Vitakraft VitaNature – available at Petsmart (NOT similarly named VitaSmart)– contains raisins and some other high-glycemic items so probably not advisable for diabetes-prone species Russian Campbell’s Dwarf, Winter White Dwarf, Chinese Hamster For example:

<http://www.petsmart.com/small-pet/food-treats-and-hay/food/vitakraft-vitanature-hamster-and-gerbil-food-26374.html>

A healthy daily supplement: A very small amount of fresh vegetables (think a couple of thumbnail-size pieces) such as well-washed broccoli, zucchini, leafy greens such as those in pre-washed “spring mix”-type salad mixed greens. (Note: NO iceberg lettuce, citrus, onion, garlic, avocado, kidney beans.) Introduce any veggies slowly, and do not feed it if any signs of diarrhea.

Pregnant or lactating female hamsters need extra protein such as unseasoned cooked egg, unseasoned, bone-free cooked chicken, plain, uncooked tofu, plain yogurt, dried mealworms.

Do Not Feed the following:

Iceberg lettuce, citrus such as orange, onion, garlic, avocado, kidney beans.

Anything with sugar, molasses, honey, and anything else with high glycemic index should not be fed to diabetes-susceptible dwarf and Chinese hamster species. Store-bought treats such as yogurt drops, honey seed sticks, and most other packaged treats are not healthy.

Most store-bought seed-and-pellet mixes.

See “Foods to Avoid” list at bottom of:

<http://hamsterhideout.com/forum/topic/96457-hamster-nutrition-v-safe-and-unsafe-foods-for-hamsters/>

Hideaway/”igloo” – Hamsters live in burrows in the wild so need a hideaway to sleep in.

o Plastic igloos and similar products are generally fine and easy to clean:

For Syrian hamsters, about 8” X 6”.

For dwarf and Chinese hamsters, about 4” X 4.5”.

o Wooden hideaways made for small animals are fine but should not be reused by another hamster since they can’t be properly washed and sanitized.

o Small, empty cardboard boxes of comparable size with an opening cut into the side can be used – remove all traces of any plastic lining such as found in tissue boxes.

Do Not Use the following:

Never use box that once contained anything toxic such as cleaning supplies.

Anything with plastic liners, staples, anything sharp unless those things are removed.

Anything formerly used by another hamster unless it can be washed and disinfected (thus hideouts made of wood or cardboard should not be reused).

Exercise Wheel -- essential; a hamster without a wheel is a depressed, unhealthy hamster!

Wheels for All Hamsters:

- o Generally, a safe, relatively inexpensive, and acceptable wheel for ALL hamsters:
Kaytee 8.5" Comfort Wheel "Large" (note: even the smallest dwarf hamsters can power these wheels as they are not too heavy).

Please see "HAMSTER COLLEGE Graduate Course" for information on various wheel options.

Do Not Use the following:

Wheels smaller than 8" diameter for Syrian hamsters. (Note: 6.5" Silent Spinner wheels are great for dwarf hamsters but much too small for Syrians.)

Wheels smaller than 5.5" diameter for dwarf and Chinese hamsters. (Note: The smallest 4.5" Silent Spinner wheels are too small for any hamster.)

Wire wheels! Wheels should be "solid-surface".

Chew sticks/blocks – Needed to keep teeth ground down (never stop growing).

- o Must be store-bought, for example Kaytee Apple Orchard Sticks are a fine choice; other wooden chews are fine. Lava Bites/blocks are okay, also.

Do Not Use the following:

Any piece of wood not specifically sold for small animals, for example, a piece of wood from outdoors or a hardware store (some kinds are toxic, will splinter, or have been treated).

Mineral blocks/chews – May be okay but there are anecdotes on mineral blocks causing kidney/bladder stones.

Salt wheels/blocks.

Chews containing added sugar/molasses/honey, especially with regard to diabetes-susceptible dwarf and Chinese hamster species.

Please see "HAMSTER COLLEGE Graduate Course" for RECOMMENDED "EXTRAS" FOR HAMSTERS including sand baths/potties, other chew treats, runabout balls, playgrounds.

COMMON AILMENTS

- o Colds/flu/respiratory infections – can catch from people, colds can quickly turn into a life-threatening bacterial respiratory infection (one reason to wash hands before handling).
- o "Wet tail"/diarrhea -- baby Syrian hamsters are especially susceptible; "Wet Tail" often fatal, contagious to other hamsters; dehydration is usually actual cause of death, needs swift veterinary intervention. Signs include wet, soiled bottom, lethargy, hunched position. *Note: OTC products such as Dri-Tail should be avoided as they can actually worsen the condition!*
- o Skin parasites – for fleas, external mites, apply tiny drop of Revolution For Kittens & Puppies topically between the shoulder blades; Demodex mites require vet-prescribed Ivermectin.
- o Ringworm, similar fungus – vet treatment required, may prescribe oral Griseofulvin or a topical anti-fungal. Frequent disinfection of cage and all supplies necessary to prevent recurrences.
- o Diabetes – 3 species are susceptible: Russian Campbell's Dwarf, Winter White Dwarf, and Chinese Hamsters. Symptoms: huge amount of drinking and urinating; urine may smell a bit like nail polish remover (acetone). Note that urinary tract infections and kidney problems can

exhibit those symptoms as well so needs vet diagnosis. Avoid foods containing sugar, molasses, etc for those species.

- o Urinary tract/Uterine infections – Hamsters do not menstruate so any genital blood or pink- or brown-tinged urine requires vet treatment ASAP.

- o Testicular cancer, epididymitis, orchiditis – Testicles can be uneven, sometimes retracted, but redness, swelling, and/or a solid lump requires vet assessment.

Note: Male Chinese hamsters often “wear” their testes poking outside of their scrotal sac (which is normal).

- o Abdominal swelling – could be from tumor, blockage, edema from heart disease, other organ failure. Some tumors can be surgically removed.

- o Cheek-pouch problems – cheek pouches extend all the way back behind the shoulders, are dry (do not produce saliva), can get impacted, infected.

- o Male dwarf/Chinese hamster scent gland problems – Scent gland in the middle of abdomens (where you’d expect a bellybutton to be), much more prominent in males. In males, look for swelling/inflammation, crust, blood, pus. *Note that waxy discharge and a greasy look is normal.*

- o Maloccluded or broken teeth – Normal incisors consist of 2 very short top, 2 very long bottom teeth. If don’t properly meet, are overgrown, will grow crooked or curled. Can be hereditary, from trauma, or infection. Vet assessment/treatment required. Often also requires special softened food preparation so hamster won’t starve.

- o Head-tilt, constant circling/spinning, and/or falling over may indicate ear infection, trauma, extreme stress, or hereditary neurological condition. Requires veterinary diagnosis, treatment.

Other resources on hamster health and ailments:

<https://www.petcha.com/hamster-health-center/>

<https://www.petcha.com/signs-of-illness-in-hamsters-and-possible-causes/>

INDICATIONS OF ABUSE/NEGLIGENCE/IGNORANCE

- o Emaciation could be from lack of food , diarrhea or other illness, maloccluded teeth (see Common Ailments).

- o Adult Syrian hamsters being kept together – this species must always live alone.

- o Hamsters of *any* species being kept together if signs of fighting (wounds, torn ears, missing eyes).

- o Filthy cage and/or wheel.

- o Lack of wheel and/or hideaway.

- o Cedar or pine shavings as bedding (or lack of bedding altogether!).

CT SHELTERS FOR HAMSTERS

In CT, I believe the following shelters sometimes take in hamsters:

- CT Humane Society

- Dan Cosgrove Animal Shelter

- Our Companions Animal Rescue

- Stamford Animal Care and Control

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN AN ADOPTER

Sadly, hamsters and other small animals are often marketed as so-called “starter pets” as if they were “practice animals” for young children, often with tragic results for everyone involved, most of all the poor hamster. In many ways, hamsters make better pets for adults than for kids, so if a hamster may be going to a home with children it is essential that a parent will be the primary caregiver and will closely supervise young children.

Please see **HAMSTER SUITABILITY QUIZ:**

<http://hamsterhideout.com/forum/topic/117473-hamster-suitability-quiz-is-a-hamster-right-for-me/>

*Note: We advise *against* adopting out a hamster as a classroom, nature center, etc pet for a variety of reasons!*

SOME CT EXOTICS VETERINARIANS WHO TREAT HAMSTERS

South Wilton Veterinary Group

Wilton, CT 06897

(203) 762-2002

<http://www.southwiltonvet.com/>

Wilton Hospital for Animals, PC

Wilton, CT 06897

(203) 762-8321

<http://www.whfact.com/index.html>

Countryside Veterinary Hospital, LLC, Jim Micinillio, DVM

Shelton, CT 06484

203-929-0500

<http://countrysidevethospital.com/>

East Hartford Animal Clinic, Dr. Wilfredo Barrios

East Hartford, CT 06108

(860) 282-8989

<http://www.drbarrios.com/>

Chippens Hill Veterinary Hospital, Dr. Larry Linnetz

Bristol, CT 06010

(860) 583-9271

<http://www.chippenshillvet.com/>

Georgetown Animal Hospital, Dr. Carol Gamez

Georgetown, Ct 06829

(203) 544 - 9098

http://www.georgetownvet.com/Georgetown_Vet/Home.html

Some other resources for finding exotics veterinarians country-wide (though please ask if they are experienced with hamsters):

<http://www.vetective.com/VetSearch.aspx>

<http://www.ratfanclub.org/vetref.html> (this is sorted alphabetically by state)

<http://aemv.org/index.php/members/vet-locator>

<http://www.rmca.org/Vets/index.php?action=list> ("**member**" as username and password)

<https://www.petcha.com/directory-of-veterinarians-for-exotic-small-mammals/>

REGULAR CLEANING

For regular cleaning, regular unscented dish detergent or white vinegar, very well rinsed, can be used.

A complete cage-cleaning and replacing all bedding substrate should be done every 1 – 3 weeks -- frequency depends on cage size and whether hamster uses a “potty” for urinating. Spot-cleaning urine-soaked bedding, and washing urine-soiled wheels should be done every 1 – 2 days.

SOME OTHER RESOURCES

Good online guides for basic care:

<http://hamsterhideout.com/forum/topic/73382-beginners-guide-to-hamster-basics/>

<http://hamsterhideout.com/forum/topic/133749-basic-hamster-care-for-newbies/>

“Hamster Suitability Quiz - Is a Hamster Right for Me?”:

<http://hamsterhideout.com/forum/topic/117473-hamster-suitability-quiz-is-a-hamster-right-for-me/>

Please see “HAMSTER COLLEGE Graduate Course” for extensive information on **FINDING A MISSING HAMSTER**.

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www.facebook.com/RescuedHamsterHaven (Please Like us and help spread the word that little animals need help, too, thanks!)

www.hopalonghollow.org/hamsters

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