

HAMSTER COLLEGE Graduate Course

SPECIES OF PET HAMSTERS



There are 5 different species of hamsters sold as pets (and about another 20 in the wild!). Very generally, they are separated into two main types, **Syrian**/"teddy bear" hamsters and "**Dwarf**" hamsters:

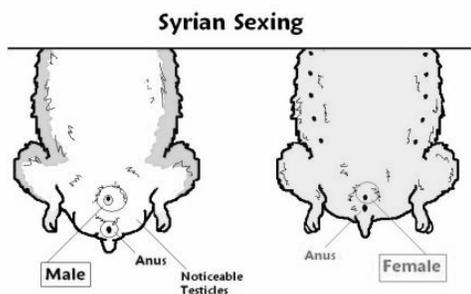
I. **Syrian hamsters** – these are the bigger, "non-dwarfs", often called teddy bear, golden, black bear, panda bear, fancy, and various other things depending on color, fur length, and sometimes the whim of the pet store.

- o 6 to 8 " in length.
- o Various colors and fur lengths.
- o Highly territorial, not communal at all with their own kind, no matter how friendly they can become with people.
- o Male pups need to be separated from mom and female siblings between 4 and 5 weeks of age to prevent pregnancies.
- o All Syrian hamsters **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). Even same-sex siblings cannot be kept together.
- o Usually more strictly nocturnal/crepuscular than dwarf hamsters, though awake briefly during the day (to eat, drink, urinate).

o To sex, the distance between genital opening and anus is the clue to sexing (male = farther apart; female = very close together) as testicles not always distended. 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 usually give off a “funky”-smelling vaginal secretion. This is normal -- smell does not permeate the room, washes right off your hands (not like getting “skunked”). Any vaginal secretion that’s present all the time, especially if smelly, is probably sign of infection, certainly if any blood. (We don’t detect smell when female dwarf hamsters go into heat.)

o All Syrian hamsters have a scent gland on each hip, sometimes called hip spots, often not visible if hamster is long-haired though often noticeably sparse fur over those spots, especially in short-haired Syrian hamsters. (We don’t detect smell from scent glands but other hamsters sure do.)



II. “Dwarf” hamsters – comprised of 4 different species:

A. The “true” dwarfs:

1. **Roborovski Dwarf** – the shyest, tiniest, fastest, and often most difficult to socialize (often called “Robo”); 1.5 - 2.5” in length

2. **Russian Campbell’s Dwarf** – perhaps species most apt to be “nippy” but certainly not a general rule; 3 – 4.5” in length; susceptible to diabetes

3. **Winter White Dwarf** (aka Siberian Winter White; Djungarian hamster) – sometimes more docile than other dwarfs; 3 – 4.5” in length; susceptible to diabetes

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 happily their whole lives in same-sex groups or pairs but *often*/*usually* ultimately need permanent separation due to fighting which can lead to terribly injury and death. Note: Play-fighting and serious fighting need to be differentiated – a good article on this is at <https://www.petcha.com/hamster-bullying-or-playing/>.

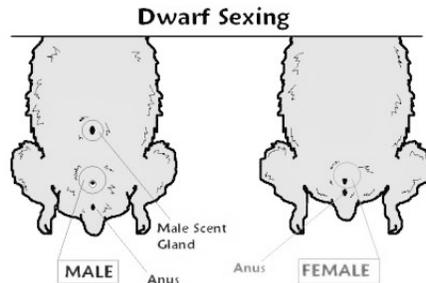
B. Chinese hamster:

- o Because of their small size, often called “Chinese Dwarf” hamsters
- o 3 – 4” in length excluding tail.
- o Have a relatively long tail (0.5 – 1” long).
- o Long and lean, dark grey or dark grey and white.
- o Controversy whether they can live together or not – **most experts advise that they 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.
- o Susceptible to developing diabetes (like Russian Campbell’s and Winter White Dwarfs).

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 This page shows lots of photos and gives 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 Hands should always be well-washed before handling a hamster, and between handling different hamsters, too. Hamsters can catch colds and other germs from people, and what's just an uncomfortable virus in a person can quickly turn into a bacterial respiratory infection in a hamster requiring a vet visit and hamster-safe antibiotics (note that a lot of antibiotics safe for people, cats, and dogs are toxic to hamsters).
- o It's also important to wash hands between handling different hamsters (other than those co-habiting) as hamsters are extremely territorial little animals -- hands that smell like another hamster are highly stressful and threatening to them (and you may get bitten!).
- o Hamsters have very poor eyesight and, thus, a bad sense of height – since they can seem calm one second and leap or fall out of your hands the next, it is very important to be sitting low to the floor, or on a bed, couch, or chair while handling a hamster to prevent tragic accidents.
- o It's important to pick up a hamster using a scooping method with fingers kept together, never with a hand held over the hamster's head with fingers apart and outstretched as this is a very threatening, scary posture to a hamster reminiscent of the talons of a hawk or claws of

some other predator. It's a good idea to always use both hands for security – you can make a little “cave” out of your hands to prevent the hamster from scurrying away, jumping, or falling. You can scoop from the sides or the top and bottom or from the front and back – the “trick” is to do it without hesitation but without frantic grabbing. Also, do not pick up a hamster by the scruff of the neck which can cause pressure that can make his eyes bulge out!

- o Since hamsters are prey animals in the wild, they are naturally terrified of being caught and eaten so an unsocialized hamster may bite, especially if they feel they can't escape. To transfer a hamster who is a known biter, or one where their degree of tameness is unknown, depending on the size of the hamster, a coffee mug or empty oats container or the like can be used – 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.

Note: Taming and socializing a hamster goes beyond merely handling the hamster humanely (as described in the aforementioned) and involves giving out-of-cage playtime in a “hamster playground” and, with important caveats, a runabout ball.

ESSENTIAL SUPPLIES

- o Housing/habitat/cage
- o Cage substrate/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 recommended.

o For any hamster, a **20 gallon “Long” aquarium** (30 “ x 12”, i.e. 360 sq. in. floor space) is considered the minimum size but many experts now consider 450 sq. in. or even larger to be recommended minimum size. **40 gallon tanks** offer more space and are preferred for that reason but can be harder to wash (heavy, unwieldy).

o **Homemade, large hamster “bin-cages”** are highly recommended for anyone handy: inexpensive, lightweight, easy to clean, consisting of a large, plastic storage bin with the lid modified with large wire mesh insert panel for ventilation. Home Depot and Walmart and Target sell big bins with locking lids that aren't expensive. Do an internet search for “hamster bin cage” for all sorts of examples, instructions, and tutorials.

For a dwarf hamster, you could use a **66 quart/16.5 gallon bin** such as this:

http://www.target.com/p/sterilite-clearview-latch-storage-tote-transparent-with-purple-latch-66qt/-/A-13794509#prodSlot=medium_1_1

But even better for a dwarf would be an **80 quart bin**:

<http://www.homedepot.com/p/HDX-80-Qt-Premium-Jumbo-Box-in-Clear-PC271612-001/204793151>

For a Syrian hamster (or pair of dwarfs or even a single dwarf) you'd definitely want to use a bigger bin -- a good choice is a **105 quart bin** like this:

<http://www.homedepot.com/p/Sterilite-Latching-106-Qt-Storage-Box-14998004/206721484>

or a **116 qt version**:

<http://www.homedepot.com/p/Sterilite-116-Qt-Ultra-Storage-Box-19908604/204725029>

Also popular for a bin (and very economical) is the huge **34 gallon Ikea Samla bin** which is on casters so it rolls!:

<http://www.ikea.com/us/en/catalog/products/90102971/>

o Online store-bought, readymade, acceptable hamster cages include:

Marchioro Kevin 82 Cage for Small Animals

<https://www.petmountain.com/product/small-pet-cages/11442-599957/marchioro-products-marchioro-kevin-small-pet-cage.html>

Marchioro Goran 82 Cage for Small Animals

<http://www.petmountain.com/product/small-pet-cages/11442-606666/marchioro-products-marchioro-goran-rat-cage.html>

Lixit Animal Care Savic Hamster Heaven Metro Cage

<https://www.amazon.com/Lixit-Animal-Care-Hamster-Heaven/dp/B003QRPAR2/>

FOP Tamburino Cage – first cage on following page:

[http://www.abbaseed.com/SMALL ANIMAL CAGES_/FOP CAGES/SMALL ANIMAL/HAMSTER CAGES_/hamster cages .html](http://www.abbaseed.com/SMALL_ANIMAL_CAGES_/FOP_CAGES/SMALL_ANIMAL/HAMSTER_CAGES_/hamster_cages_.html)

Note: Not tall enough accommodate extra-large wheels for Syrian hamsters but fine for 8.5" Kaytee Comfort Wheel; remove unnecessary wooden hay rack for more room.

Criceto Charlie Prestige – last cage on following page:

[http://www.abbaseed.com/SMALL ANIMAL CAGES_/FOP CAGES/SMALL ANIMAL/HAMSTER CAGES_/hamster cages .html](http://www.abbaseed.com/SMALL_ANIMAL_CAGES_/FOP_CAGES/SMALL_ANIMAL/HAMSTER_CAGES_/hamster_cages_.html)

Note: Wheel that comes with this cage is too small and flimsy, need to buy separate wheel; will not accommodate extra-large wheels for Syrian hamsters.

Do Not Use the following cages:

Crittertrails, Habitrails, and the like

Any aquarium smaller than 10 gallons (and larger needed for long-term care)

Any wire cage with bar spacing greater than 1/2 inch for Syrian hamsters and about 1/3 in for dwarfs and Chinese (note that Roborovski Dwarfs do better in tanks or bin cages). For example, wire cages for guinea pigs and rabbits have too-wide bar spacing.

Any cages with wire/wire mesh floors or platforms, though those can be mitigated by covering the wire with pieces of cardboard, then replacing once soiled/chewed

*Tall cages (such as those that are fine for expert climbing species such as rats) should be *avoided* (unless full shelves can be added) as they are too dangerous -- hamsters can climb but, having poor eyesight and a poor sense of height, can fall or drop and get hurt.*

Cage Bedding substrate – Hamsters make tunnels and burrows in the wild so need a cage substrate ("bedding") to live in. Bedding should be at least 4 - 5 inches deep. Colors are fine but scents are NOT! 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 Substrate/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

While hamsters will drink out of a bowl or dish, water bottles are preferred because dishes can easily get tipped over or fouled with bedding, food, and droppings.

Water bottles in 4 oz to 8 oz size range are ideal (hamsters can have difficulty drinking from bottles larger than 8 oz).

Less likely to leak if filled all the way.

Check that’s there’s no air lock or other problem dispensing water freely by tapping end of drinking spout with *clean* finger.

Water bottles with slanted spouts seem to be easier to drink from than those with vertical spouts.

Should be rinsed out and water changed every 1 – 2 days.

Ideally, a new water bottle should be purchased for a new hamster (not reused). See Cleaning section if this isn't practical.

Food bowl/dish

Some people simply sprinkle food loose in cage but a dish provides cleaner food plus enables monitoring.

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

Food

Hamsters are omnivores, not vegetarians and they cannot survive eating hay.

Need: 17 – 22% protein; 4 – 7% fat; 6 – 15% fiber.

Hamsters generally need about a tablespoon of food per day.

Hamsters are self-limiting when it comes to food. If a hamster becomes obese it is because of **what** they are being fed, not how much (or because of some rare metabolic disorder). Note that what can look like a "fat" hamster might be an abdominal tumor or edema from some other serious ailment.

Too much food is better than too little – hamsters are hoarders and need to store some extra food to feel safe and secure. (They may bring it into the hideaway, sand bath/potty, store it in a corner, or leave it in the dish.)

Three hamster species are susceptible to developing diabetes: Russian Campbell's Dwarf, Winter Winter Dwarf, and Chinese (i.e. Roborovski Dwarf and Syrian hamsters are not). See COMMON AILMENTS section for symptoms. Please avoid fruits and any vegetables such as carrots with a high glycemic index for diabetes-prone hamsters -- while it's not thought that these foods could cause diabetes, the hope is that limiting sugar as much as possible might help prevent incipient diabetes from developing, and it is thought that they would be harmful to a hamster who already has the disease.

Most pet store-available hamster food is either too low in protein, contains added forms of sugar such as molasses (okay for Syrian hamsters and Roborovski Dwarf hamsters but a potential death sentence for diabetic or borderline-diabetic dwarf and Chinese hamsters), or both. Additionally, hamsters will selectively eat the "goodies" (sunflower and pumpkin seeds, fruit bits, other treats) in the food, leaving the "boring" little brown pellets behind, but it's these little pellets that contain the important nutrients! Thus, as main staple, recommended is a homogeneous, healthy "rodent block"/"lab block" though a healthy seed mix is

recommended as a supplement since hamsters need variety.

Note: All rodent blocks are not created equal, and most store-bought brands are not recommended.

o A safe, healthy, highly-regarded rodent block for all hamsters is **TEKLAD #2018** – unfortunately, this is not available in stores and must be ordered online. (Note: this used to be Harlan Teklad, now it is Envigo Teklad.) Teklad is available online at various sources but an excellent online source is Wee Companions, a small animal rescue which offers various versions of Teklad in both small and larger quantities:

<http://weecompanions.org/healthy-food>

Scroll down to “ENVIGO” section and select #2018 from dropdown boxes beneath “Order Teklad here”.

Note: Shelf life of Teklad for maximal nutrition is only 6 months so not a good idea to buy a lot at a time. (Shelf life can be extended a couple of months by storing in freezer.)

o Note: **Teklad #8640**, also available at same link, is higher in protein (thus even better) but contains molasses – it is **recommended for Syrian hamsters and Roborovski Dwarf hamsters since they are not prone to diabetes.**

o Another rodent block (available at Petco) is one that's actually sold for rats and mice - **Mazuri Rat and Mouse Diet** (considered too high in protein for most 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.

Another homogenous-type hamster food that's safe for all hamsters *and* has enough protein unfortunately is available only from the U.K. – **Supreme Science Selective Hamster Food**. In the U.S., it can be ordered online from these sources, for example:

https://www.viovet.co.uk/Supreme_Science_Selective_Hamster_Food/c1095/ (They do ship to the U.S.)

https://www.ebay.com/p/Supreme-Petfoods-Science-Selective-Hamster-350-G/1302877703?_trksid=p2047675.m4096.l9055

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B01CUFERU6/> (It seems to be more expensive on Amazon)

Oxbow "Essentials" is too low in protein (15%), to use as a main staple but contains no forms of sugar, not even corn, so it's a good supplement for diabetic/diabetes-prone hamster species.

Also, hamsters need variety in their diets, including a seed mix and very small amount of fresh vegetables. (Note: NO iceberg lettuce, citrus, onion, garlic, avocado, kidney beans.)

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

o **Higgin's Vita Garden** – safe for all hamster species. For example:

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

o **Vitakraft VitaNature** (NOT similarly named VitaSmart nor other Vitakraft foods) – this 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. Too low in protein to be main staple. For example:

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

o **Sunseed Sunations Hamster & Gerbil** (Note that this is NOT Sunseed Critter Cubes, Sunseed Sun Basics, or Sunseed Sunscription Vita Prima Dwarf Hamster which are *not* recommended.) Like the above-mentioned Vitakraft VitaNature, because it contains apples, carrots, and raisins, probably not advisable for diabetes-susceptible hamsters, i.e. Chinese, Russian Campbell's Dwarf, Winter White Dwarf. For example:

<http://www.thatpetplace.com/sunations-natural-hamster-gerbil-food-2-lb>

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). Introduce any veggies slowly, and do not feed it if any signs of diarrhea.

Occasional healthy supplements and treats can include tofu, edamame, spray millet, dried mealworms, or a small piece of fruit (though fruit should be avoided for diabetic hamsters).

Ideas for healthy occasional supplements and treats can be found on

<http://hamsterhideout.com/forum/topic/96457-hamster-nutrition-v-safe-and-unsafe-foods-for-hamsters/>. Other links at the top of that page include information on commercial foods and other subjects, an excellent and comprehensive source of information on hamster food and nutrition.

Pregnant or lactating female hamsters should be fed extra protein which can be in the form of such foods 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 - consult

<http://hamsterhideout.com/forum/topic/102520-hamster-nutrition-iv-commercial-hamster-food-list/> .

Also scroll down to “Foods to Avoid” list at

<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.

Plastic igloos and “walk-up barns” are generally fine and easy to clean:

o “Small”/”Mini” appropriate for Syrian hamsters – about 8” X 6”, for example:

<http://www.petsmart.com/small-pet/toys-and-habitat-accessories/tunnels-and-hideouts/super-pet-small-animal-mini-igloo-color-varies-14621.html>

o “Itty bitty” appropriate for dwarf and Chinese hamsters – about 4” X 4.5”, for example:

<http://www.petsmart.com/small-pet/toys-and-habitat-accessories/tunnels-and-hideouts/super-pet-small-pet-itty-bitty-igloo-color-varies-14633.html>

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.

Small, empty cardboard boxes of comparable size with an opening cut into the side can be used as long as originally contained either food (such as a cookies, oatmeal, etc) or something inert (such as tissues or sandwich bags) – 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

A wheel is essential; a hamster without a wheel is a depressed, unhealthy hamster!

Wheels for All Hamsters:

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). For example:

<https://www.amazon.com/Kaytee-Comfort-Exercise-8-5-Inch-Colors/dp/B0002AS94C>
"Large" on <http://www.petmountain.com/product/rat-mouse-cage-habitat-accessories/11442-504492/kaytee-kaytee-comfort-wheel.html>

Other Wheels for Syrian hamsters (besides Kaytee 8.5" Comfort Wheel):

Some larger Syrian hamsters will find even the 8.5" Comfort Wheel to be too small for very comfortable running. There are several, different, larger (and more expensive) wheel options that are recommended (not all cages will accommodate bigger wheels, however).

- o **10.5" Carolina Storm Express Wheel** and **Carolina Storm Bucket Wheel** (extremely quiet!):

<http://www.etsy.com/shop/CarolinaStorm>

- o **11" Wodent Wheel Senior:**

<http://www.sugar-gliders.com/exercise-toys/34-two-wodent-wheel-senior.html>

http://www.exoticnutrition.com/Products/Wodent-Wheel-11_WW11.aspx

- o **9" Silent Runner:**

http://www.exoticnutrition.com/Products/Silent-Runner-Wheel-9_43672.aspx

- o **12" Silent Runner:**

<http://www.exoticnutrition.com/Products/Silent-Runner-Wheel-12->

[\(Regular\)_43673.aspx](http://www.exoticnutrition.com/Products/Silent-Runner-Wheel-12-(Regular)_43673.aspx)

- o **12" Comfort Wheel:**

"Giant" on <http://www.petmountain.com/product/rat-mouse-cage-habitat-accessories/11442-504492/kaytee-kaytee-comfort-wheel.html>

Wheels for Dwarf and Chinese hamsters:

o **6.5" Silent Spinner**, for example:

“Regular” on <https://www.petmountain.com/product/chinchilla-cages-accessories/11442-505040/kaytee-kaytee-silent-spinner-small-pet-wheel.html>

Unfortunately, they market 6.5" Silent Spinner wheels for Syrian hamsters but they are much too small, forcing the poor hamster to have to arch his/her back to run in it. It is, however, a good choice for dwarf hamsters. Note: When washed, the spinning mechanism can permanently seize if soaked and water gets into it though that won't happen with a quick wash and rinse (however, by unscrewing center knob, wheel can easily come apart for safe soaking).

o **For the small Roborovski Dwarf hamsters, 5.5" Kaytee Comfort Wheel**, for example:

“Small” on <http://www.petmountain.com/product/rat-mouse-cage-habitat-accessories/11442-504492/kaytee-kaytee-comfort-wheel.html>

Do Not Use the following:

Wheels smaller than 8" diameter for Syrian hamsters.

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.)

Do not use wire wheels for hamsters. The “old-fashioned” wire wheels with just metal spokes/bars are downright dangerous and should be banned -- hamsters have been known to break their little legs in these when they slip through the bars. The wire mesh kind isn't recommended by most (though there's some debate about this) because the wire mesh can cause abscesses, or little toenails can get caught and ripped. Wheels should be “solid-surface”.

Chew sticks/blocks – Like other rodents and rabbits, hamsters' teeth never stop growing so they need hard things to chew to keep them “in trim”.

o Must be store-bought, Kaytee Apple Orchard Sticks are a fine choice, for example; 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 of wood are toxic to hamsters or will splinter or might have pesticides 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.

RECOMMENDED “EXTRAS” FOR HAMSTERS!

Empty toilet paper or paper towel tubes. (For Syrian hamsters, often recommended to cut a slit lengthwise down the tube so they can't possibly get stuck.)

Sand bath/potty/litter box:

Some hamsters will actually use a “litter box” for urinating, but note that even if the hamster doesn't take to using the litter box/potty for peeing, they will usually at least use it for taking a little "sand bath" (when the potty litter is fresh) -- so it's a nice little activity for them, regardless, and a nice thing to offer them; additionally, it helps make cage-cleaning easier and more pleasant, though the additional minor chore of scooping the litter box on a daily basis and washing it weekly are extra tasks, however minor.

Since hamsters usually choose a specific corner for urinating, we can take advantage of that by giving them a little shallow bowl, “hamster potty”, or other receptacle for that purpose. But you do have to be very careful what you use as the potty litter -- cat litter, for example, would be very dangerous for them!

Recommended “sand bath” substrates/potty litter:

- o **Kaytee “Soft Granule Blend small pet bedding” UNscented** – sold in the bedding department but usually works wonderfully for “sand baths” and potties for Syrian hamsters. For example, <https://www.petco.com/shop/en/petcostore/product/kaytee-soft-granule-pet-bedding>

Dwarf hamsters usually much prefer actual sand (can be used for Syrian hamsters as well), but the kind of sand is very important:

- o **Supreme Tiny Friends Farm Bathing Sand** (formerly Charlie Chinchilla Sand) – the one “bathing sand” I know of that's not too dusty for hamsters; available only online (very reasonable at petmountain.com, pretty expensive on amazon.com) <http://www.petmountain.com/product/chinchilla-bedding-litter/11442-584996/supreme-pet-foods-tiny-friends-farm-bathing-sand.html>

o Reptile sand, as long as it's quartz-based (not calcium carbonate) – recommended is **Zoo Med Repti Sand Desert White** (not Zoo Med Vita Sand), for example:
<http://www.petsmart.com/reptile/substrate-and-bedding/zoo-medandtrade-repti-sandandtrade-desert-reptile-sand-1851694.html>

or

<http://www.petmountain.com/product/gecko-bedding/11442-510885/zoo-med-zoo-med-reptisand-desert-white.html>

Note: Roborovski Dwarf hamsters in particular usually love a sand bath.

Do Not Use the following sand/potty litter:

Cat litter, corn cob litter, pine pellets, etc

Chinchilla Dust, Powder, or Kaytee Chinchilla sand – all of these are too dusty for hamsters (bad for respiratory systems and eyes)

Any reptile sand that is calcium carbonate and/or has any additives such as vitamins or coconut fibers

Any scented versions of the “Soft Granule Blend small pet bedding” – sadly, this is sold in many scents (some of them even caustic scents such as cinnamon and mint!) but anything scented is a very bad idea for hamsters

Other chew treats, for example:

o Whimzees dog chews, for example:

<https://www.petco.com/shop/en/petcostore/product/whimzees-small-alligator-dog-treats>

o Milk Bones dog biscuits, plain.

o An unseasoned walnut in the shell, cracked open or with a large hole chopped into the side.

Taming/Socializing Tips (please also see “**Handling Hamsters**” section above):

For the hamster's mental well-being at any age and no matter how tame he may be: Please never ever startle them out of sleep, especially don't just lift up the hideaway -- that should be "sacrosanct": The hamster should have a place to sleep where he knows no big giant is going to disturb him! It's best to let a hamster wake up and come out of their hideaway on their own, but if you need him to come out sometime when he's in there, such as for socializing purposes

or cage-cleaning, here are three steps that I think should be done in order to get the hamster to come out in as stress-free a manner as possible.

(1) First, tap on the cage and say his name gently,

(2) Then, tap lightly on the outside of his hideaway. If he doesn't come out then, the next step is

(3) Bribery!: Take a healthy little treat such as an unsalted, shelled pumpkin seed or sunflower seed and hold it at the entrance of the hideaway while gently tapping and talking to him.

Hamsters have bad eyesight but a great sense of smell to make up for it so he'll smell the seed and you can lure him out with it. To make it smell even stronger, you can break/nick the end of the seed to release the aroma a little more (that's why without the shell works best). Note that it can take weeks to socialize a hamster, and how tame they can become also depends on individual personality. Note: Pumpkin seeds are high in fat, no more than one per day.

Syrian hamsters are usually more strictly nocturnal than dwarfs so try socializing and handling them only in the late evening or at night (best is when they are awake on their own).

One of the best ways in my experience to tame a hamster is by providing out-of-cage playtime in a little playground (please see Playground section below). And, for hamsters who enjoy it, giving the hamster maybe 20 minutes in a Runabout ball. Feed them after playtime when you put the hamster back in their cage. If you do this consistently at the same time each evening, the hamsters usually adjust their body clocks to wake up then and start looking forward to being handled by you (because they know it leads to fun out-of-cage time which they crave followed by yummy food!). After a little while, they'll start coming to the cage door asking to come out in the evening when you come into the room (though this can depend on the species of hamster, as well as individual personality).

Runabout Ball:

o 7 inch "Regular" size is appropriate for Syrian hamsters, for example:

<https://www.petsmart.com/small-pet/toys-and-habitat-accessories/toys/super-pet-run-about-small-animal-ball-14624.html>

o 5 inch "Mini" size is appropriate for dwarf/Chinese hamsters, for example:

<https://www.petsmart.com/small-pet/toys-and-habitat-accessories/toys/super-pet-run-about-small-animal-ball-14625.html>

Never force a hamster to use the ball -- in my experience, most Syrian hamsters and many dwarf hamsters jump right in once they've tried it once (the first time you may need a little patience before they climb into it) but occasionally I'll have a hamster who turns their body or head away when it's offered, they clearly don't want to go back into it in which case I *never* make them go in the ball. Provide only playground-time for hamsters with Runabout Ball aversion!)

But for hamsters who seem to enjoy them, please observe the following rules:

- o Never force a hamster to go in one (as discussed above).
- o Don't ever leave the hamster in the ball unattended -- it can get stuck under a piece of furniture or against a wire, immobilizing the poor hamster which must be frightening, frustrating, or otherwise stressful for them.
- o For the same reason, don't hold the ball any longer than you have to with the hamster in it.
- o No matter how tightly you think the lid is "locked", always use a little piece of tape to secure it -- if the ball bumps into a corner or something just the right way, the lid will pop off! And here's a handy tip: Use what's known as painter's tape -- it will hold the lid securely but is much easier to take on and off the lid and ball than other kinds of tape and won't leave sticky residue.
- o Never EVER use the hamster ball where it could possibly go down any stairs!
- o Don't leave the hamster in the ball for more than about 15-30 minutes at a time -- even if they love it and want to jump right back in, they need the opportunity to get out of it and have a drink of water or a bite to eat, in case they want to.
- o Since hamsters sometimes poop and/or pee in the ball, wash the ball after use with mild dish detergent or plain white vinegar and rinse and dry it well before next use.
- o Please be VERY CAREFUL picking up the ball by the two indentations in the lid when the hamster is in it -- the ball can easily slip out of your hands or the lids can come off, injuring your hamster (or worse!), so please put a hand under the ball as soon as you pick it up for secure handling.

Flying Saucers:

- o For a Syrian hamster, the "large" 12 inch size is appropriate, for example:
<https://www.chewy.com/ware-flying-saucer-small-animal-/dp/128624>
- o For a dwarf/Chinese hamster, the "medium" 7 inch size is appropriate, for example:
<https://www.petco.com/shop/en/petcostore/product/small-animal/small-animal-toys-habitat-accessories/you-and-me-exercise-saucer-medium>

The 5" flying saucer is too small for any hamster, and the 7" flying saucer, though great for dwarfs, is too small for a Syrian hamster.

Hamster Playground:

One thing that makes a great playground that protects the floor or carpet and is easy to clean is a doggie/kiddie pool such as this:

<http://www.kmart.com/summer-escapes-3-ft-pet-pool/p-004W002298332001P>

and Petsmart often sells them during the summer season:

<https://www.petsmart.com/dog/grooming-supplies/bathing-equipment/summer-escapes-pool-pet-bath-5802.html>

A larger version with slightly higher sides is this one:

<http://www.target.com/p/ev-summer-45-in-poolpool-blue/-/A-41982934>

Please note that some Syrian hamsters can jump up and pull themselves out of these.

Another option is a small pet playpen such as this:

http://www.drsfostersmith.com/product/prod_display.cfm?pcatid=17948

(and you can even make it bigger by getting two -- they will link together). And to protect the floor or carpet you can simply put down newspaper or cut open a large, plastic garbage or lawn & leaf bag (don't use a towel on anything made out of fabric -- little toenails can get stuck in the fibers and/or it can be dangerous if the hamster chews on it). But some Syrian hamsters manage to shimmy up the sides, even though the bars are vertical, and escape. (Taller versions of this are unsafe because if the hamster can shimmy up the bars -- and some hamsters can -- then there is a dangerous drop to the floor.) Again, always monitoring playground time is important.

But for a free, easy-to-make playground, please see:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6d2eUTe2vC8>

Another fine DIY playground is shown here:

<https://hammyhappenings.wordpress.com/diy-rodent-play-pen/>

Put a little dish of water in the playpen, just in case the hamster gets thirsty, and provide at least one wheel (you can move the one that's in their cage into the playpen temporarily though different kinds of a wheel or flying saucer will provide some variety) plus lots of tubes, little cardboard boxes, other toys to climb on and into.

For ideas for the playground contents, while there are plenty of hamster toys in stores, you can provide home-made toys out of such things as empty tissue boxes (with any plastic lining removed), little zip-lock sandwich bag boxes, garbage bag boxes, and any other kind of box, as long as it once contained either edible or inert substances, and you can cut little doors and windows cut into them; empty cardboard oatmeal canisters (a big favorite); PVC plumbing pipes from hardware stores (cheaper than buying hamster tubes and large enough for even the largest Syrian hamsters), empty jars lying on their sides, "bendy bridges" such as <https://www.petco.com/shop/en/petcostore/product/you-and-me-bend-a-bridge>, and other things to climb on and in (as long as they're safe in case chewed and not too tall in case fallen from).

FINDING A MISSING HAMSTER

Anyone with a hamster should know what to do if and when their hamster escapes!

The first thing you should do if your hamster ever escapes is to put out little dishes of water in any room the hamster might be -- even if you don't get your hamster back right away, at least they won't die of dehydration in the meantime!

“The Bucket Trick”: Get a bucket/cleaning pail and place a layer of bedding in the bottom (for a “soft landing”), then add some irresistible, aromatic treats in the bucket such as a chunk of broccoli, apple, pear, grape cut in half, cheese, each with a thin smear of peanut butter on them; put a little smear of peanut butter on the lip of the bucket, too. Then make a ramp or steps up to the top of the bucket using books, wood, something not too steep nor too slippery (I use a slanted, corrugated cardboard cat scratcher). Hamsters have a great sense of smell to compensate for their bad eyesight and a poor sense of height, so he will smell the treats, climb up the steps/ramp to get to them, and fall in the bucket – there’s a soft later of bedding in there, too, so the hamster gets his treats safely and you get your hamster, safe and sound!

There are variations on this technique plus some other ideas at these links:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkB7nUtQoKM>

<https://www.thespruce.com/finding-a-lost-hamster-1238925>

<https://www.petcha.com/finding-a-hamster-in-hiding/>

<https://www.petcha.com/finding-a-lost-hamster/>

<http://www.chahamsters.org/gandaescapee.html>

COMMON AILMENTS

Hamsters can catch colds and other germs from people, and what’s just an uncomfortable virus in a person can quickly turn into a bacterial respiratory infection in a hamster requiring a vet visit and hamster-safe antibiotics (note that a lot of antibiotics safe for people, cats, and dogs are toxic to hamsters). This in one of several reasons why it’s important to wash hands before handling.

Baby Syrian hamsters especially are susceptible to “wet tail” (proliferative ileitis), a very serious and often fatal intestinal disease causing severe diarrhea; dehydration is usually the actual cause of death, and swift veterinary intervention and antibiotics are required in hopes of saving the hamster. Some people call any form of diarrhea “wet tail” because signs of it cause a wet, soiled bottom, and generally any sign of diarrhea, whatever the cause, needs veterinary help. True “wet tail” and other diseases can be highly contagious among other hamsters, and sometimes to other animals, so proper disinfecting cages, hideaways, wheels, food dishes, and other supplies is crucial (it is recommended that used water bottles be discarded, and new ones

provided to new animals). *Note: OTC products such as Dri-Tail should be avoided as they can actually worsen the condition!*

There are different kinds of skin parasites that hamsters can have, some from external sources such as “rat mites” and fleas, others from microscopic species-specific Demodex mites which normally reside on mammals but can proliferate and become problematic in an immune-compromised hamster. A *tiny* drop of Revolution For Kittens & Puppies topically between the shoulder blades often kills non-Demodex parasites (and with just one application). Demodex “mange” requires vet-prescribed Ivermectin.

Ringworm and the like fungus – Can be mistaken for Demodex “mange”, usually more crusty. Contagious to people and other animals. Vet may prescribe oral Griseofulvin or a topical anti-fungal. Frequent disinfection of cage and all supplies necessary to prevent recurrences.

Diabetes – Russian Campbell’s Dwarf, Winter White Dwarf, and Chinese Hamsters are all susceptible to developing diabetes. This presents as a huge amount of drinking and urinating and urine can smell a bit like nail polish remover (acetone). Note that urinary tract infections and kidney problems can exhibit those symptoms as well so needs veterinary diagnosis.

Uterine infections, pyometra – Hamsters do not menstruate so any blood in genital area requires vet help ASAP.

Testicular cancer, epididymitis, orchiditis – Hamster testicles can be uneven in size and sometimes retracted but redness, swelling, and/or a solid lump requires vet care. Note: Male Chinese hamsters often “wear” their testes poking outside of their scrotal sac (which is normal).

Urinary tract infections – Any pink-tinged urine, as well as blood needs veterinary help, oral antibiotics.

Abdominal tumors – An abdominal lump and/or swelling may be a sign of a tumor. Some tumors can be surgically removed.

Heart disease – Sadly, hamsters can be prone to heart disease, and sudden death in hamsters can be caused by atrial thrombosis. Also, some Syrian hamsters have hereditary cardiomyopathy which can cause difficult breathing, weakness, and swelling.

Cheek-pouch problems – Hamster normally carry food and, sometimes, bedding in cheek pouches that extend all the way back behind the shoulders. Unlike our cheeks, hamster cheek pouches are dry (do not produce saliva) so anything sticky can get stuck, rot, and cause infection; additionally, anything sharp can cause damage and infection.

Male dwarf hamster scent gland problems – 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. In males, scent gland can sometimes get clogged, irritated, infected, or even cancerous. However, note that waxy discharge and a greasy look is normal.

Maloccluded teeth – Top and bottom incisors (front teeth) don't properly meet, are overgrown, grow crooked or curled. Can be hereditary, from trauma, or infection. Teeth likely will require regular trimming or grinding down by vet. Often also requires special food preparation, i.e. rodent blocks crushed and dissolved in a little water to make a soft "stew". Note that normal hamster incisors consist of two very short top front teeth and two very long bottom front teeth.

"Stargazing" and other neurological disorders – Can be hereditary, from trauma, stress, or infection. "Head tilt" and circling/spinning can be from middle/inner ear infection. Some dwarf hamsters compulsively spin, look up ("stargaze") and fall over, do back flips. Requires veterinary diagnosis to determine 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

Emaciation could be from lack of food or from maloccluded teeth (see Common Ailments) and inability to eat

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

Any hamster species being kept together if signs of fighting (wounds, torn ears, missing eyes).

Filthy cage and/or wheel.

Lack of wheel and/or hideaway.

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 strongly advised 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 pet, nature center animal, etc for a variety of reasons!*

SOME CT EXOTICS VETERINARIANS WHO TREAT HAMSTERS

South Wilton Veterinary Group
51 Danbury Rd
Wilton, CT 06897
(203) 762-2002
<http://www.southwiltonvet.com/>

Wilton Hospital for Animals, PC
215 Danbury Rd.
Wilton, CT 06897
(203) 762-8321
<http://www.whfact.com/index.html>

Countryside Veterinary Hospital, LLC, Jim Micinillio, DVM
374 Leavenworth Road
Shelton, CT 06484
203-929-0500
<http://countrysidevethospital.com/>

East Hartford Animal Clinic, Dr. Wilfredo Barrios
109 Connecticut Blvd.
East Hartford, CT 06108
(860) 282-8989
<http://www.drbarrios.com/>

Chippens Hill Veterinary Hospital, Dr. Larry Linnetz
595 Clark Avenue
Bristol, CT 06010
(860) 583-9271
<http://www.chippenshillvet.com/>

Georgetown Animal Hospital, Dr. Carol Gamez
53 Redding Road
P.O. Box 659
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 – some exotics vets are not):

<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> (**enter the word "member" both as username and password to get in**)
<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.

Washing urine-soiled wheels and spot-cleaning urine-soaked bedding, and should be done every 1 – 2 days. (Note: Not all hamsters urinate in their wheels, and many won’t even urinate in their bedding if a litter box/potty is supplied – please see **Sand bath/potty/litter box** section above.)

DISINFECTING USED SUPPLIES (in preparation for a new hamster and/or sick hamster)

A 10% bleach solution can be used to disinfect hamster supplies (with very extensive rinsing, of course), or a veterinary-recommended, animal-safe a highly regarded, animal-safe (and people-safe!) disinfectant such as a product called “Rescue”, formerly named “Accel”, for example:

<https://www.amazon.com/Rescue-RTU-Disinfectant-Deodorizer-32/dp/B003MFC86Y> (It also is available as wipes.) Apparently, this is effective against ringworm, among other pathogens.

Cage, wheels, plastic hideaways, and other washable supplies should be disinfected using above before reusing for a new hamster.

Anything wooden, cardboard, straw, wicker, etc, i.e. anything that can't be properly washed/disinfected and thoroughly rinsed should not be reused for a new hamster (should be discarded).

If possible, a new water bottle should be provided when there is a new hamster. If a used water bottle must be reused, it should first be washed and flushed with hot, soapy water, then with a 10% bleach solution, then rinsed extremely well. NOTE: Most water bottles have a black or clear plastic washer or gasket in the base of the nozzle – this should be removed for careful cleaning as it can harbor bacteria underneath it. If clear, it can be very difficult to see! Pry from base of nozzle with a knife point or similar.

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/>

Food information:

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

<http://hamsterhideout.com/forum/topic/102520-hamster-nutrition-iv-commercial-hamster-food-list/> (Please note that lists U.K.products, too.)

Claudie

Westchester Rescued Hamster Haven

Email: claudiemail@earthlink.net

Cell: 914-439-5250

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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