

Gerbils

Gerbil Facts

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| Scientific Name: | Meriones unguiculatus |
| Life Span: | 2 – 4 years |
| Environment Temperature Range: | 65F - 85F |
| Relative Humidity Range: | 30 – 50% |
| Breeding Range: | 10-12 weeks |
| Estrous Cycle: | 4-6 days |
| Gestation Period: | 24 – 26 days |
| Litter Size: | 3 – 7 young |
| Weaning Age: | 21 days |

The gerbil is a curious, friendly, and nearly odorless rodent, which makes it a very popular pet. They have adapted well to captivity and tend to be relatively free of naturally occurring infectious diseases. These rodents rarely bite or fight, are easy to keep clean, and are relatively easy to handle. These qualities make the gerbil an ideal pet.

The native color variety is agouti- mixed brown with dark pigmented skin with a light brown or white belly and darker back coat. Other color varieties include black, white, and cinnamon. Color combinations of black or brown with a white band over the chest area are also common. Gerbils have a marking scent gland, which appears as a tan colored hairless area in the middle of their abdomen.

Diet and Handling

Diet

As with any pet, good quality food and clean fresh water must be provided at all times. In the wild, these animals feed on leaves, seeds, and roots. Current recommendations for feeding in captivity are pelleted rodent ration containing 20% - 22% protein. These rations are typically processed as dry blocks or pellets designed for rodents.

Seed diets are also “formulated” and sold for gerbils, but these diets should only supplement the basic rodent pellet. Gerbils prefer sunflower-based diets to pellets, but these seeds are low in calcium and high in fat and cholesterol. When fed alone, seed diets often lead to obesity and potential nutritional deficiencies.

Other supplements to the diet may include sugarless breakfast cereals, whole wheat breads, pasta, cheese, fresh fruits and vegetables. These should all be considered “treats” and should be fed in moderation.

Although gerbils in the wild require little water to drink since they derive most of their fluid from the foods they ingest, caged gerbils must be provided with a continuous source of clean water. Inadequate water consumption can lead to dehydration, weight loss, and eventually death. Water is easily provided in water bottles equipped with sipper tubes. This method also helps keep the water free from contamination. Always make sure that the tubes are positioned low enough to allow the pet easy access. The average adult gerbil drinks approximately 4 to

10 ml of water daily. Although this amount is only a fraction of the total bottle volume, fresh water should be provided daily.

Handling

The gerbil's natural curiosity and friendly disposition makes it fairly easy to handle. Most gerbils will approach a hand introduced into their cage and can be easily scooped into the palm of the hand or picked up by grasping the base of the tail (close to the body). Be careful only to grasp the gerbil by the base of the tail, for the skin over the end of the tail is easily pulled off! Gerbils not accustomed to being handled may jump and run, but rarely become aggressive. Once picked up, the gerbil can be restrained by placing one hand over his back. The gerbil may struggle when held or manipulated, so be careful not to let it escape.

Housing and Breeding**Housing**

Several types of cages are available which are suitable for housing gerbils. Many of these units come equipped with cage furniture such as exercise wheels, tunnels, and nest boxes as added luxuries. Such accessories, as well as sufficient litter depth within which to burrow, are desirable for the pet's psychological well-being.

Cages should be constructed with rounded corners to discourage chewing. Gerbils will readily chew through wood, light plastic, and soft metal, so recommended caging materials are wire, stainless steel, durable plastic, or glass. Be aware that glass and plastic containers drastically reduce ventilation and can lead to problems with temperature and humidity regulation. These materials make suitable cages when at least one side of the enclosure is open for air circulation. In addition, make sure that the enclosure is escape proof.

Gerbils thrive in solid bottom cages with deep bedding and ample nesting material. Bedding must be clean, non-toxic, absorbent, relatively dust free, and easily acquired. Shredded paper or bedding made from recycled paper products are preferred. Be sure that all bedding is free from mold, mildew, or other contamination before using. Do not use cedar chips or chlorophyll impregnated shavings since they have been associated with respiratory and liver disease. Provide at least two inches of bedding in the cage to allow normal burrowing behavior. Cotton and shredded tissue paper make excellent nesting materials.

Adult gerbils require a minimum floor area of 36 square inches and a cage height of 6 inches. A breeding pair of gerbils requires a much larger area, approximately 180 square inches. Optimal temperature range for gerbils is between 65 and 85 F. The relative humidity should be between 30% and 50%. Twelve hour light cycles are preferred, with gerbils being roughly equally active day and night.

Gerbils are social animals that tend to cohabitate well together. The typical social interactions consist of grooming, wrestling, and communal sleeping. However, gerbils may become aggressive to intruders, and they may fight when crowded or mixed as adults. Breeding pairs are kept together with the male even helping to raise the young.

As a rule of thumb, the cage and accessories should be thoroughly cleaned at least once weekly. Factors that may require increased frequency of cleaning are the number of gerbils in the cage, the type of bedding material provided, and the cage design and size. Cages should be sanitized with hot water and nontoxic disinfectant or detergent, and then thoroughly rinsed. Water bottles and food dishes should be cleaned and disinfected daily.

Breeding

The gestation period of gerbils is 24 to 26 days on average. Litter size averages 4 to 6 pups, which are born blind and naked. Ears open at 3 to 7 days, hair coat develops at 7 to 10 days, incisors erupt at 12 to 14 days, and eyes open at 14 to 20 days. Weaning occurs by the age of 21 days.

Young gerbils are rarely abandoned or cannibalized. Some factors that may lead to abandonment include small litters, excessive handling of young, lack of nesting material, and lack of an area for concealment of the nest. Hand feeding of neonatal rodents is difficult and often unrewarding.

Non-Infectious Conditions

Epilepsy

The gerbil has a genetic tendency to develop epileptiform seizures. The occurrence rate for the general pet population is 20 to 40%. These seizures may be initiated by fright, handling, or exposure to a new environment. The attacks can be mild (slight shaking) to very severe (violent convulsive body jerking, erratic movements, and collapse). The convulsions appear not to have any long-term effects. In some rare instances, however, death may result following very severe seizures. Anticonvulsant therapy is not indicated, and can cause more serious side effects than the seizures themselves. Frequent handling during the first few weeks of life and providing a stable environment with a complete, balanced diet can help suppress the seizures in genetically predisposed gerbils.

Tail Sloughing

Improper handling of gerbils can result in the loss of fur from the end of the tail. This occurs when the animal is grasped by the tip of the tail. The skinless tail dies and falls off with the stump usually healing without complications. In some instances, the tail may need to be amputated to prevent infection.

Nasal Dermatitis (Bald Nose)

Gerbils commonly develop hair loss on the nose and muzzle with open lesions and crusting. This condition is caused by coarse bedding or rough surfaces within the cage or environment. Nasal dermatitis tends to affect young gerbils most often. Cedar shavings used as bedding tend to worsen the condition. In severe cases, secondary bacterial infections may occur. If treated early in the course of the disease with appropriate antibiotics, this condition often resolves, but if not attended to early, the treatment may be unrewarding.

Disease Conditions

Renal (Kidney) Disease

Older gerbils (2 1/2 to 4 years of age) may develop weight loss, loss of muscle mass, poor appetite, and lethargy. In addition, an increase in water consumption may be observed. These are all signs consistent with renal disease. Treatment is only supportive in rodents, with emphasis on providing fresh, clean water and food at all times to prevent stress that may trigger full renal failure.

Neoplasia (Cancer or Tumors)

Gerbils have a relatively high incidence of cancer after they reach 2 years of age. The organ most affected is the ovary. Ovarian tumors are common in female gerbils. They may develop distended abdomens. The skin is the second most affected site for tumors in the gerbil. Squamous cell carcinomas and melanomas are most frequently encountered. Melanomas have a tendency to develop around the ear, foot or base of the tail. The ventral marking scent gland is the third most common site of neoplasia. This gland is located in the midabdominal area. It is a hairless oval tan structure which tends to be more prominent in males. The gland produces an orange-colored secretion which is used to mark territory. Tumors of this gland appear as "abscesses" on the abdomen. Usually the tumor is not malignant, but may have a secondary bacterial infection. Many other organs may be affected by cancer, but much less often. Where possible, surgical intervention as early as possible is the treatment of choice.

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