

COMMERCE AND EMPLOYMENT DEPARTMENT

GUIDANCE FOR THE WELFARE OF PET GERBILS

MADE UNDER SECTION 13(6) OF THE ANIMAL WELFARE (GUERNSEY) ORDINANCE, 2012

GUIDANCE – FOOD AND WATER

Food

In their natural habitat gerbils eat seeds, grain and bulbs, leaves and herbs, in captivity gerbils eat seeds and grain and can be fed small quantities of nuts and small amounts of fresh fruit (pear, melon, apple, oranges) and vegetables (cucumber, carrot, pumpkin and fennel).

Gerbils must be provided with a balanced diet that contains all the nutrients, vitamins and minerals that they need. This can be achieved by providing a commercial pelleted ration formulated for gerbils.

Care must be taken when feeding coarse mixes to gerbils as they may selectively eat only certain seeds and grains and leave others. While the whole coarse mix diet will be balanced gerbils will only receive a balanced diet if they eat all of it. If coarse mixes are used then they should not be replenished until all of the ration is eaten in order to ensure that gerbils receive a balanced diet.

For this reason pelleted foods are recommended over coarse mixes because each individual pellet provides balanced nutrition.

Adult gerbils will eat around 4–10g of food per day. This can be provided by giving a tablespoon of gerbil pellet twice per day, in the morning and the evening.

Gerbils like sunflower seeds and peanuts, but because these are high in fat they should not be part of the diet and should only be fed occasionally, as treats. Pumpkin seeds are a preferable treat for gerbils. Sugar-based treats (such as honey sticks) should be avoided.

Some food should be scattered and hidden within accommodation to encourage natural foraging behaviour, manipulation of food and general interest and activity. Gerbils will store large quantities of food if given the opportunity and care must be taken to ensure that stored food does not become stale or decompose and become a health hazard to the gerbil. Uneaten stored food should be removed daily.

Do not make sudden dietary changes because this can upset a gerbil's stomach.

Each day monitor how much the gerbil is eating and drinking. You must take your gerbil to a vet if you notice changes in the consumption of food or water intake or should faeces become moist or the gerbil's hind-quarters become soiled. Gerbils excrete small amounts of highly concentrated urine and their droppings are normally dry.

Water

Gerbils must always have access to fresh, clean drinking water and water containers should be refilled daily.

Water should preferably be provided from a bottle with a valveless sipper tube as gerbils may have difficulties in overcoming the resistance in a traditional 'ball-valve' sipper tube. Check that the water is not dripping or that the tube is blocked regularly every day.

GUIDANCE – ENVIRONMENT

In the wild gerbils live in dry climates, in large, deep burrows that they dig themselves to protect them from extremes of weather and from predators. Gerbils need a warm, safe environment and should be kept indoors not outdoors. Gerbils must not be exposed to draughty, damp conditions or direct sunlight. Their accommodation should not be placed next to a radiator; their ideal temperature range is 20-24°C. Gerbils should not be let out of their accommodation unless they are closely supervised.

Housing

Accommodation must:

- a) provide a space for gerbils to hide and build a nest and a separate space for them to exercise and this space should be high enough to allow them to stand on their back legs without their heads touching the roof,
- b) be predator proof,
- c) be free from hazards such as sharp objects or wood treated with chemicals which are hazardous to gerbils health,
- d) have a solid floor with raised sides to contain burrowing material,
- e) be provided with soft nesting material,
- f) be ventilated, but protected from draughts,
- g) provides predictable daylight or a light period equivalent to daylight in every 24 hour period, and
- h) allow continuous access to food and water.

A cage must not be made of wood as this material is not easy to clean and gerbils can gnaw through wood.

Cage bars must be of stainless steel and sufficiently close together to prevent escape. (1/4" x 1/4" (6mm x 6mm) and 23 SWG (0.610 mmØ) is a guide).

Suitable housing for gerbils include a gerbilarium (a terrarium) with a glass base and walls with a secure lid (often cage bars) that allows ventilation or ventilated plastic cages linked with tunnels such as the 'Rotastak' system. Whatever housing is provided it must give the gerbils an opportunity to dig and space to exercise.

Housing that consists of a shallow plastic tray with a cage on top of it is not ideal for gerbils because they can damage their legs on the bars of the cage and the tray is not sufficiently deep to enable burrowing. If a gerbil spends a lot of time repetitively scratching in the corner of a shallow tray it is an indication that this environment is not sufficient to enable the gerbil to demonstrate normal burrowing behavior.

Shelters and nesting material

A shelter for sleeping and nesting material should be provided to assist with regulation of body temperature, for hiding, sleeping and storing food. It should ideally have multiple entrances to avoid dominant animals trapping others inside and or dominant animals preventing other animals from entering. An entrance via an angled tube is recommended because it prevents from directly light entering the shelter.

Gerbils are highly motivated to create their own nesting material by shredding gnawable material such as ink-free cardboard or paper and hay. Empty toilet rolls, egg boxes or plain cardboard boxes are also ideal.

Nesting materials that can separate into thin strands such as cotton wool or similar 'fluffy' bedding products are not suitable because they pose a serious risk to the welfare of gerbils by becoming entangled around their limbs.

Exercise and Enrichment of the Environment

A gerbil must be provided with space to exercise (ideally a minimum of 1500cm² (50cm x 30cm) per adult gerbil and 1900cm² (64cm x 30cm) for gerbils which are kept together as a family/clan/horde).

The space should include enrichment to encourage normal behaviour such as digging and tunnel construction. Gerbils claws need to be worn down through regular digging or walking/running on rough surfaces or they may grow too long. A rough-surfaced object such as a stone will help wear down claws and can provide structure to burrows. Large stones also provide suitable places for scent-marking.

Gerbils have fur on the soles of their feet and so do not climb well but objects such as tubes, untreated fruit tree branches, ladders and raised platforms encourage exercise. If tubes are provided they must be no less than 5cm diameter or there is a risk that gerbils will get stuck. Plastic tunnels and toys should not be provided as gerbils because they will destroy them very quickly and may ingest the plastic. Tunnels made of wood or hay are ideal.

An exercise wheel can be provided, but should not be the only means by which a gerbil can exercise. A wheel should be of a large diameter (such as one intended for a rat), axle free and have a non-slip running surface (but not rungs). If a gerbil develops sore feet whilst using a wheel it should be removed temporarily and advice should be sought from a veterinary surgeon.

Burrowing Material/ bedding material

Burrowing material must be of a consistency and deep enough to allow gerbils to create tunnels. Non-toxic dried peat may be suitable but garden soil is not recommended as it may contain harmful bacteria or parasites. Other suitable bedding substrate includes a mix of unscented rough-grained woodchips which are marked safe for rodents and hay to provide more structure to burrows and additional gnawing opportunities.

Coniferous wood shavings or sawdust are harmful to the health of rodents because they give off aromatic hydrocarbons (phenols) and acids that are damaging to the respiratory tract and liver.

Noise

Gerbils communicate using ultrasonic frequencies so are sensitive to some sounds that humans cannot hear. Gerbil accommodation should be placed away from noisy equipment such as television sets, music systems, running water or vacuum cleaners. Loud noises startle gerbils causing them stress; they assume that they are in danger if they hear loud or threatening noises.

Heat

Gerbils should be kept away from bright, direct sunlight, radiators and in an environment that keeps the temperature at between 20°C and 24°C.

GUIDANCE - HEALTH

Monitoring Health

A gerbil should be visually inspected daily for signs of illness and injury. It should be weighed regularly to check for rapid gain or loss of weight.

Injuries

A gerbil should be physically examined when handled for injuries and lumps and bumps. Veterinary advice should be sought if any injury is severe.

Illness

Sign of illness in a gerbil include:

- a) changes in behaviour,
- b) significant weight change over a short period,
- c) loss of appetite, diarrhoea,
- d) drinking much more or less than normal,

- e) lack of energy/sleeping more than usual,
- f) unusual swellings,
- g) skin conditions,
- h) limping,
- i) bleeding,
- j) signs of pain, such as sensitivity to touch,
- k) runny eyes or nose, and
- l) overgrown teeth and nails.

This list is not exhaustive.

Soreness of the nose and eyes may be caused by abrasions from coarse bedding, unsuitable burrowing material or rough surfaces.

A gerbil must only be treated with medicines that have been recommended by a veterinary surgeon. Human and other animal medicines can be very dangerous to gerbils.

Care of Teeth

Gerbil's teeth grow continually throughout their lives and they need a suitable gnawing material to maintain their teeth at an appropriate length. Wooden chew-blocks are ideal and gerbils particularly of Willow, Hazel, Beech, Birch, and branches from fruit trees. However Ivy, Yew or Holly as these are poisonous to gerbils.

Gerbils' front teeth should be regularly examined to make sure that they are positioned and growing correctly. If the teeth become overgrown, take your gerbils to a vet.

Care of Coat

Gerbils must be provided with a dust bath to allow them to dust bath to keep their coats in good condition. Chinchilla sand is an appropriate material to put into a shallow tray to create a dust bath. After every use the dust should be sieved clean and stored for re-use.

Frustration and Stress

Gerbils should be provided with a variety of environmental enrichment aids. These should be changed regularly so that they remain stimulated and don't get bored.

Hygiene

Accommodation should be thoroughly cleaned between once a week to once a fortnight as required. Cleaning can be stressful and removing all odors may trigger territory disputes and

fighting so transfer a small amount of used but unsoiled bedding and nesting material after cleaning the accommodation.

Bedding and nesting material must not be allowed to become damp or smelly and wet, damp or smelly bedding and nesting material and objects soiled with faeces must be cleaned and replaced daily. Gerbils have acute senses of smell and will become stressed by strong smells.

Uneaten food, especially moist food such as fruit and vegetables that will rot, must be removed daily.

Handling

Regular interaction (on a daily basis) will enable a gerbil to become accustomed to people and to being handled. Create a predictable handling routine so that they are not startled. Perhaps offer preferred food or a treat such as pumpkin seeds to help you bond with your gerbil during handling. A gerbil should be:

- a) allowed to investigate human hands in their own time,
- b) picked up in a confident but gentle manner in two cupped hands and the hands gently opened so that it can sit on joined palms.
- c) handled near to a surface to reduce the distance of any fall.

Extra care must be taken if pregnant females are handled.

Gerbils must not be picked up by the tail. Improper handling can lead to tail sloughing and a skinless tail will require amputation by a veterinary surgeon.

GUIDANCE BEHAVIOUR

As prey animals, gerbils are naturally timid and use their burrows to protect themselves from predators, which they construct themselves by digging. It is important to ensure that gerbils always have an opportunity to hide and dig at all times of the day and night. Gerbils are highly social animals that are active both in the day and at night with periods of rest in between periods of activity.

Companionship

Gerbils need the company of other gerbils and must be housed in groups. However males and females kept together will breed and this should only be allowed to occur if you are able to find good homes for the offspring.

It is preferable to keep two or three gerbils of the same sex together that have grown up together as littermates because this helps reduce the risk of aggression. Additional group members should not be added at a later date as established groups are unlikely to accept new animals, with the possible exception of juveniles less than 5 weeks old.

To introduce young gerbils to an established group, the animals must be housed separately but the housing must be adjacent to each other for a week or so before putting them together.

Used bedding must be transferred from the new gerbil's home to that of the established group, and vice versa, and monitor them carefully when introducing them for signs of aggression. Mutual grooming and nose-to-nose contact are signs that the animals are bonding.

Gerbils are very interactive and will chase and play with each other. This may include play fights involve pouncing on each other, wild chasing and boxing. However, this activity should be monitored and if it becomes aggressive (a gerbil may lose weight, have bite marks and stop sleeping in a nest) gerbils should be separated.

GUIDANCE - BREEDING

Breeding gerbils must be planned and owners should inform themselves of what is required and ensure that there is a home or a market for the offspring.

If males and females are kept together they will breed. Keeping more than one breeding pair together may result in fighting and cannibalism of the offspring.

Selection of Breeding Stock

Gerbils can produce offspring from about 10 weeks of age. Female gerbils should not be bred if they are older than 18 months of age.

Both of the parents must be healthy and of good temperament.

Breeding should be managed by introducing one female (doe) to one male (buck).

Care of Pregnant Females

Further breeding will be prevented by removing the buck before the pups are born. However the father of a litter will not harm the young and will help with their care.

The gestation period is 24 to 28 days.

A doe with a litter of pups up to 21 day after their birth requires addition space (ideally a minimum of 1500cm² (50cm x 30cm) of floor space).

Care of Young

The environment should not be disturbed or changed in the first week after the pups are born as this will lead to stress in the mother.

Gerbils wean from milk at 3 to 4 weeks and should be removed from the parents after between 5 and 6 weeks or when a next litter arrives.

GUIDANCE - TRANSPORTING GERBILS

Gerbils find transport very stressful and they should be transported in their gerbilarium whenever possible. If they have to be transferred into a smaller carrier, provide for all their

needs, food, water (by means of such things as a piece of fruit or a vegetable), bedding etc. Also ensure that the carrier is escape-proof (one that they cannot gnaw through).

Transporting an established group together reduces the stress of transport, but can also help to reduce aggression upon re-introduction to their group. If you cannot do this, place some familiar smelling bedding and nesting material/other objects in the carrier.

Make sure the gerbilarium or carrier has a cover to keep it dark during the journey. However, it is important that it also allows air to pass in and out of the carrier for ventilation. The gerbilarium or carrier must be secured in the vehicle and protected as much as possible from noise, bright light, vibration, heat and cold.

Transport your gerbils in a quiet, air-conditioned car, rather than on public transport. Plan your route to minimise journey time and maintain suitable comfort and environmental conditions.

Gerbils should be transported at temperatures at between 20° and 24°C.

If owners have to leave their gerbils for any reason, they must be confident that your pets are cared for by somebody who understands their needs. Ideally they will have been introduced to the gerbils beforehand. The carer must be provided with all the information necessary to take care of the pets in the form of a written document. The gerbils must be kept in their familiar gerbilarium and fed their usual food.

This guidance is given by the Department with a view to securing the welfare of pet guinea pigs. It is additional to the Welfare Recommendations set out in the **Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of Pet Gerbils** made by the Department and available at [insert link etc.]. A breach of the Code may be relied upon in Court proceedings.