

COMMERCE AND EMPLOYMENT DEPARTMENT

GUIDANCE FOR THE WELFARE OF PET HAMSTERS

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

GUIDANCE – FOOD AND WATER

Food

In nature, hamsters eat a mixture of seeds, cereals, insect larvae and larger insects such as crickets.

Hamsters must be provided with a balanced diet that contains all the nutrients and minerals that they need. This can be achieved by providing either a commercial compound pelleted ration formulated for hamsters or a coarse mixture of different seeds.

Care must be taken when feeding coarse mix that a hamster does not selectively eat only certain seeds and leave others. While the whole of a coarse mix diet provides a balanced diet, if a hamster only eats certain elements of it, it will not receive balanced nutrition. Therefore, if a coarse mix is used then it should not be replenished until all of the mix is eaten in order to ensure that a hamster receives a balanced diet.

Pelleted foods are preferable because each individual pellet provides balanced nutrition.

For variety, small quantities of greens, cleaned root vegetables or pieces of fruit such as apples can be provided. This should be part of the diet, not additional to it. Grapes or rhubarb should not be given to hamsters as they can be poisonous to rodents. A small amount of protein can be occasionally added to the diet in the form of hard-boiled egg, flakes of cooked fish or very small amounts of cheese.

Food may be placed in a flat dish or directly on the floor of a cage. Hamsters hoard food in a private larder and will transfer any food that it does not eat to its larder.

Wet or powdered food must only be provided on the advice of a veterinary surgeon.

Water

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

Water should ideally be provided from a bottle with a valveless sipper tube as hamsters may have difficulty in overcoming the water resistance in a traditional 'ball-valve' sipper tube.

GUIDANCE – LIVING ENVIRONMENT

Hamsters need a warm, safe environment and must be kept indoors in a warm room (18°C to 22°C) rather than outdoors.

Housing

Accommodation must:

- a) provide a space for a hamster to hide, build a nest and hoard food and a space for it to exercise,
- b) be predator proof,
- c) be free from hazards such as sharp objects or wood treated with chemicals which are hazardous to hamsters health,
- d) have a solid floor to contain bedding material,
- e) be provided with bedding material that covers the floor as well as quantity of soft nesting material,
- f) be ventilated, but protected from draughts,
- g) provide predictable daylight or a light period equivalent to daylight in every 24 hour period.
- h) allow continuous access to food and water.

A cage with bars is preferable and the bars should be of stainless steel.

A cage must not be made of wood unless it has a laminated plastic covering. Wood is a material which is not easily cleaned and hamsters can gnaw through un-armoured wood.

Nesting boxes or shelters

If a hamster does not have the opportunity to construct a burrow, it must be provided with a place to hide, this can be achieved by providing a nest box or shelter that should be dark inside and large enough to enable a hamster to set up a lair and move around comfortably. Nest boxes must be sufficiently ventilated to prevent the accumulation of condensation which can cause health problems.

A shelter or nesting box should be placed close to food and nesting material.

Exercise and Enrichment of the Environment

A hamster must be provided with space to exercise (ideally a minimum of 75cm x 40cm x 40cm (30" x 15" x 15")) The space should include enrichment to encourage exercise, such as tubes, ramps, bars for climbing and raised platforms.

An exercise wheel can be provided, but should not be the only means by which a hamster can exercise. A wheel should be of a large diameter (such as one intended for a rat), ideally axle free and have a non-slip running surface (but not wire rungs).

Exercise balls are not recommended because of the risk of injury to hamsters.

Bedding and Nesting Materials

Bedding material must be provided. Suitable materials are dust-free wood shavings or granulated corn-cob (that must be free of preservatives or other chemicals). Fragrant and coloured bedding material should be avoided.

Nesting material must also be provided. Suitable materials are good-quality hay, wood wool or shredded paper or cardboard. Materials that can separate into thin strands such as cotton wool, man-made fibres or similar 'fluffy' bedding products must not be used.

Noise

A cage should be placed away from items in the home which can generate ultrasound, such as television sets, computer screens, vacuum cleaners or sources of running water (hamsters are very sensitive to high frequency sounds which people cannot hear, and can find this stressful),

Cold Conditions

If a hamster is kept at temperatures below 18°C it may to hibernate.

Hot Conditions

A hamster should be kept away from direct, bright sunlight and should not be kept in temperatures above 26.5°C as this can be fatal.

Light

A hamster should be kept in a room where the lights go off at more-or-less the same time each night.

GUIDANCE - HEALTH

Monitoring Health

Hamsters have a high metabolic rate and can loose condition very quickly, however, they may often only show subtle signs of pain, distress or suffering.

A hamster should be visually checked daily for signs of:

- a) normal behaviour, movement, breathing and sitting,
- b) bright eyes and a shiny coat,
- c) wounds or lumps, and
- d) wet or damp perineum.

Hamsters are susceptible to poisoning by aerosol sprays which may settle on their coats which the ingest when grooming themselves.

Injuries

A hamster may develop sore feet from using an exercise wheel. If this occurs the wheel must be temporarily removed. Veterinary advice should be sought if the injury is severe.

Care must be taken not to drop hamsters when handling them. Always handle a hamster close to a surface to reduce the distance of a fall.

Illness

Sign of illness in a hamster include:

- a) not eating or drinking,
- b) sitting in a hunched-up position,
- c) sunken, dry or dull looking eyes,
- d) disinterested at times when they are normally active,
- e) loosing weight or quickly putting weight on,
- f) drinking a lot,
- g) wet faeces and/or diarrhoea (which may lead to soiling of their rear-end),
- h) laboured breathing,
- i) discharge from the nostrils, eyes, vagina etc,
- j) persistent sneezing or coughing,
- k) difficulty walking, or unsteady balance,
- l) not using a limb,
- m) firm, warm and swollen stomach,
- n) abnormal lumps or bumps, impacted cheek pouches, and
- o) hair loss.

This list is not exhaustive.

Veterinary advice must be obtained if a hamster appears to be ill or in pain, even if the cause is not clear.

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

Care of Teeth

Hamsters' teeth grow continually throughout their lives, and they gnaw objects to keep their teeth sharp, and regularly worn down.

A hamster must be provided with a suitable gnawing material such as twigs and branches from fruit trees which have not been treated with chemicals which are hazardous to a hamsters health or hard wood gnaw blocks (soft wood can create splinters which can damage hamsters delicate cheek pouches).

A hamsters front teeth must be checked regularly. Dental problems are not uncommon and if one incisor tooth becomes damaged, the other tooth can keep growing and may eventually prevent feeding. If this occurs or if teeth become overgrown, veterinary advice must be sought.

Feeding occasional raw carrots and apples can help keep hamsters teeth clean.

Care of Coat

Long-haired breeds must be regularly combed or brushed with a dry soft tooth brush to keep their coat clean and un-matted. Advice on how to grooming can be provided by a pet care specialist.

Whiskers

A hamster's whiskers are very important for exploring objects, because their sight is very poor. Whiskers must never be trimmed.

Frustration and Stress

Hamster are naturally very timid and loud and threatening noises will startle and frighten them and cause them distress.

If a hamster has a barren environment, stress, frustration and/or a lack of mental stimulation can lead to it developing repetitive behaviour (such as gnawing the bars of their cage for long periods of time). If this occurs, environmental enrichment must be provided or veterinary advice sought.

Hamsters can find the presence and scent of other animals in the home stressful and they should be kept away from predators, such as cats. Other animals in a household must not have access to a hamster or their cage and a hamster should not be left unsupervised with another animal.

A hamster should not be disturbed when it is sleeping other than in the case of concern for its health.

Hamsters use odours including pheromones to communicate and cages should not be kept next to one another, in addition:

- a) females in oestrus produce potent pheromones and should not be housed near males, and
- b) males secrete pheromones to mark territory and this can be stressful for other males nearby.

Hamsters that are stressed are particularly likely to become ill.

Hygiene

Accommodation should be thoroughly cleaned at least once a week. Sense of smell is very important to hamsters, so a small amount of old unsoiled bedding and nesting material should be retained and re-used when a cage is cleaned.

Wet, damp or smelly bedding and nesting material, faeces and objects soiled with faeces, uneaten fresh food must be removed and replaced on a daily basis.

Fresh food and water should be provided daily and water bottles cleaned once a week.

If a hamster is sick and requires wet food on the advice of a veterinary surgeon, all traces of it should be removed at least twice a day to ensure that the food does not start to degrade. Wet food is susceptible to mould or bacteria growth which can be harmful to a hamster.

Handling

Hamsters are timid animals, and although they can become accustomed to careful handling, they become frightened and aggressive if they feel threatened. Hamsters are susceptible to some human viruses so if the owner or keeper is ill, handling should be avoided.

Regular interaction (on a daily basis) will enable a hamster to become accustomed to people and to being handled. A hamster should be:

- a) stroked gently when being fed
- b) allowed to investigate hands in its own time,
- c) 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, and
- d) handled near to a surface to reduce the distance of any fall (hamsters have a very delicate skeleton).

Hamsters should not be handled when they are resting or sleeping, unless absolutely necessary as they can find this stressful.

GUIDANCE BEHAVIOUR

Hamsters are generally nocturnal animals and usually become active shortly before dusk. They usually rest and sleep during the daytime. For this reason fresh food should be provided in the evening so that it will be eaten while it is still fresh. If fresh food is provided in the mornings it will have spoiled before it is eaten.

Companionship

Hamsters are generally solitary animals, and can be aggressive towards other hamsters. Most species of hamster cannot be housed in groups. Syrian and Chinese hamsters in particular are not naturally sociable and should be kept on their own.

If social species of hamsters are housed in groups, great care must be taken to ensure the groups are compatible. Ideally hamsters that are housed together should be young litter mates or introduced as a group when they are young. A group should be no more than 2 or 3 in number and additional group members should not be added at a later date.

If possible, social species of hamsters should be housed singly but adjacent to each other for a week before they are housed together. A cage with a lot of space and enrichment and separate shelters for each hamster to hide from other group members should be provided. Hamsters should not be left overnight until it is clear that they will tolerate one another.

Hamsters must be regularly checked to make sure that aggression between the group members is not a problem. When aggression occurs between hamsters it can be very dramatic and lead to serious injury or even death.

Hibernation

Hamsters do not have to hibernate, but may do so if kept in a low temperature environment. As there is no biological need for a hamster to hibernate and the process of hibernation is not without risk, hibernation should not be encouraged. To avoid hibernation the hamster should not be kept in temperatures below 18°C.

GUIDANCE - BREEDING

Breeding hamsters 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.

Selection of Breeding Stock

A female hamster must not be bred until it is at least 13 weeks old and should not be bred for the first time if it is 8 months of age or older.

Female hamsters will only mate when "in season" or "on heat" which is normally every fourth day, approximately between sunset and sunrise. At any other time the female is likely to turn on a male and injuries can occur if they are not separated quickly.

Male and female hamsters must be separated after breeding.

Care of Pregnant Females

The Gestation period is only sixteen days and care should be taken with handling and feeding after the first seven days. Eight to ten young is normal (but can be as high as twenty). Pregnant hamsters require more water than normal and benefit from small quantities of milk.

Two days before the birth is due the female's cage should be cleaned and fresh bedding supplied to make a nest. All old food should be removed and new food provided to avoid disturbing the hamsters environment after she gives birth.

If birth has not taken place by the morning of the eighteenth day of pregnancy, veterinary advice must be sought.

Care of Young

If a female covers the babies every time she leaves a nest it is important that the nest and the young are not be disturbed in her absence as she may destroy them upon her return. If the nest is left open, the young may be visually examined.

Hamster pups suckle their mother to first receive colostrum then milk. From around 10 days old the young begin the process of weaning so a little solid food may be sprinkled into the nest.

The young can be split from the mother from twenty-one days and by twenty eight days the sexes should be separated. By three months each hamster is should have its own cage, unless it is of a social species and remains compatible with other members of its birth group.

The average lifespan of a hamster is 18months to 2 years.

GUIDANCE - TRANSPORTING HAMSTERS

Hamsters should be transported in a secure pet cage (one that they cannot gnaw through to escape).

Cages must be provided with nesting material for comfort and should be covered to keep it dark (the cover must not impede ventilation).

Hamsters should only be transported as a group if they are normally housed together as a group.

On longer journeys, food (such as pellets) and water (by means of such things as a piece of fruit or vegetable) must be provided.

The hamsters transport temperature must be maintained between 18 and 22°C.

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 Hamsters** made by the Department and available at [insert link etc.]. A breach of the Code may be relied upon in Court proceedings.