



# Gerbil (Mongolian)

(*Meriones unguiculatus*)

Diet: Herbivorous, Adult Size: body length 3-6" plus a 3-8" long tail, Lifespan: 3-4 years, Native to: Semi-deserts and Steppes of Mongolia Characteristics: Intelligent, inquisitive, sociable, quiet, tolerates handling well, active during the day.

## Did You Know???

- Native to arid habitats, Mongolian Gerbils store water in their fat cells. They produce dry feces and very little sweat or urine.
- Unlike most desert animals, the Mongolian Gerbil is not nocturnal, though in nature gerbils stay underground during the hottest and coldest parts of the day.
- It is illegal to own a gerbil in the state of California – in that sunny, dry environment; any escaping gerbils would breed so rapidly that they'd soon pose a threat to crops.

## Look out for this:

Gerbils are Olympian jumpers - their powerful little hind legs will easily rocket them out of any open enclosure. Once gone, a gerbil may be hard to find. In deference to its great jumping ability, a gerbil must always be kept in an enclosure with a secure top. However, always make sure that the enclosure provides plenty of ventilation.



## 10 Things You Should Know About Gerbils

**The Basics** – There are around 90 species of wild gerbil, but the Mongolian Gerbil is the species most commonly sold as a pet. Clean and virtually odorless, the gerbil is sweet, easy to tame and active during the day. If handled regularly from an early age, a pet gerbil will probably become very tame.

In their native Mongolia, gerbils survive in temperatures ranging from 110°F in summer down to -40°F in winter, with an average for most of the year in the high sixties. The gerbil has few natural predators in its harsh natural environment, which may explain why it's such a trusting critter.

A very social animal, the gerbil should not be housed alone. It's best to keep at least a pair together. Littermates of the same sex make the best companions, though unrelated gerbils

will usually get along just fine if they're together from an early age. However, older animals can often be more reluctant to accept new enclosure mates.

**Enclosure: Make It Escape Proof** – Gerbils can jump amazingly high for little critters, so their housing must have a secure top. If their enclosure opens from the top rather than the side, the keeper should exercise great care to protect against jump-escape. Any exit area of the crafty gerbil's enclosure should be checked regularly and made secure.

A wire cage offers plenty of ventilation, but unless the enclosure has solid walls at least a few inches high, the gerbil's frantic digging and burrowing will send substrate flying far and wide. An aquarium tank with a well-ventilated (and securely fastened) lid keeps substrate where it belongs, and offers an unobstructed view of the inhabitants' lively antics.

A pair of gerbils should be kept in at least a 20 gallon tank. Three to four gerbils will need a 30-40 gallon tank. Multi-level enclosures featuring ramps and shelves give gerbils plenty of room to roam without taking up too much space. Tubular plastic hamster habitats are generally not suitable for gerbils, since these habitual chewers can easily gnaw their way through in a matter of days.

Always position a gerbil's enclosure away from drafts, heaters and direct sunlight.

**Chewing: Chew Toys Are A Must** – Since gerbils' teeth grow constantly, they need to gnaw on wood to keep from becoming literally "too long in the tooth." If a gerbil has nothing to chew, its teeth will grow to the point where it won't be able to close its mouth, and it will starve.

These determined little critters will gnaw through anything they can, so avoid giving them plastic toys and accessories. For the same reason, plastic hamster habitats are unsuitable for most gerbils. Chew toys should be inspected on a daily basis, and replaced if they're soiled or excessively worn.

**Exercise: They like to play** – The gerbil needs to exercise more than just his jaws, so provide a solid exercise wheel with no open rungs or spokes that could trap a tail. The exercise wheel must be made entirely from metal, since a gerbil will chew through a wooden or plastic model. Even the nut that fastens the wheel to its base should not be made of plastic.

**Bedding: They Like To Burrow** – Gerbils like their substrate to be several inches deep to allow them to dig and burrow. Providing a three layer of substrate with a 6" high bank at one end of the enclosure is an economical way to offer plenty of digging depth.

The substrate should be absorbent and dust free - suitable materials include wood shavings, corncob bedding or a rodent substrate made from reclaimed wood pulp or pelleted paper. Never use cedar or pine based products, since they can cause severe respiratory problems. Use shredded paper bedding in the nesting area.

**Nesting Material: They Like A Cozy Bed** – Gerbils need some kind of nesting material to create a sleeping area. Be aware that some commercially available nesting materials can choke the

animals or cause intestinal obstructions if swallowed, or can entangle and amputate limbs - a couple of white paper tissues placed in the enclosure will soon be converted into a snug and comfortable nest.

Non-plastic hamster nesting boxes can also be used, so long as they are either durable enough to withstand chewing or inexpensive enough to be replaced frequently.

**Temperature & Humidity: They're Happy When You're Happy** – Though they hail from a part of the world with extreme temperature fluctuations, gerbils are happiest when the temperature's between 65-85°F with a humidity of around 30-50%. This means they're usually very content at an average room temperature, needing no special heating or lighting.

**Food & Diet: Sneak Out The Sunflower Seeds** – A commercially available dry hamster & gerbil food offers the perfect combination of protein, minerals, vitamins and fiber to maintain good health. Feed a gerbil about ¼ ounce of this premixed food or pellets per day.

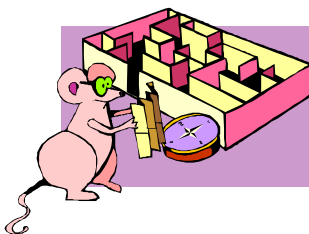
Gerbils gobble up sunflower seeds about, as quickly as kids eat candy, but since the seeds are very high in fat, they should be given only as an occasional treat. Don't put sunflower seeds in a bowl with a gerbil's ordinary diet. Most gerbils will eat only the seeds and ignore the healthier stuff.

Rodent blocks and pellets, as well as the occasional fruit and vegetable can also be offered in moderation. Broccoli and apple are good choices, but avoid vegetables grown from bulbs, such as onions. Remove uneaten fruit and vegetables promptly, and discard uneaten dry food daily. Always make sure fruit is washed thoroughly to remove all pesticides.

**Water: They Need Plenty of Fresh Water** – Even though these desert dwellers are masters at conserving moisture efficiently, they do need a constant supply of clean, fresh water. Chlorine-free bottled water is preferable to tap water.

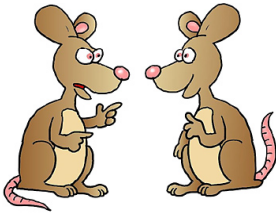
Use a cage-mounted small animal drinking bottle rather than a dish, choosing one with a chew-proof metal tip. Change the water daily, and check for leakage - the water should only come out when the animal sips at the tube. Make sure that the gerbil hasn't blocked the water bottle by kicking substrate up the spout.

**Grooming: They're Clean Critters** – Thanks to their low sweat and urine output, gerbils are naturally clean and odorless. Since they regularly groom themselves and each other, they need no grooming by their owner. Some gerbils like to take an occasional 'dust bath' in a shallow dish containing a layer of chinchilla dust an inch deep, but this is by no means essential. Discard the dust and wash the dish after each use.



## Pint-Sized Engineers

In nature, large numbers of gerbils live together in a maze of underground burrows, with separate areas for socializing, sleeping, eating, food storage, baby care, and even a spot for going to the bathroom.



## Gerbils Just Wanna Have Fun

Since gerbils love to wrestle and roughhouse with one another, some owners mistake their pets' energetic play for fighting. Unless an animal is being visibly hurt, it's usually not necessary to separate the scuffling pair.

## How To Handle A Gerbil

Before even opening the enclosure, check the room to make sure it's safe for the gerbil, just in case the pet escapes. Doors and windows should be closed, and any openings that can provide a ready escape route should be blocked. Cats, dogs and other pets should not be in the same room when a gerbil is removed from the enclosure.

A gerbil should never be held over a hard surface. When holding a gerbil, keep him close to the ground over a soft pillow, or hold him above the enclosure.

Approach the gerbil with from the sides with both hands rather than from above. Scoop the animal up with cupped hands, bringing one hand underneath so he is sitting on the palm. Bring the other hand up over his back. Do not squeeze, even if the animal tries to squirm out - a gerbil can often be hurt more by a sharp squeeze than by a fall. Never pick up or hold a gerbil by the tail, since this can cause pain and injury.

When handled regularly from an early age, most gerbils become very tame – offering a sunflower seed when you handle a new gerbil will help develop a bond between you. In many cases, gerbils will run up to the edge of the enclosure and stand up on their hind legs to greet a human companion.

## Gerbils Around The House

Gerbils are always on the lookout for a quick escape, and can scamper away under the furniture in the blink of an eye. As already mentioned, the area must be gerbil-proofed before the enclosure is even opened, with cats and dogs elsewhere in the house, electrical cords off the floor, and doors closed. Make sure to block off any nooks and crannies the gerbil could wriggle into, and keep cleaning fluids and other hazardous materials out of harm's way. The areas below and behind heavy furniture should be blocked. Above all, watch the animal closely at all times. If a gerbil should escape, close all doors, lay out a few sunflower seeds as bait, and wait silently without moving until the animal pops out to grab them.

## Cleaning The Enclosure

Inspect the substrate daily, picking out droppings and removing uneaten food. Every 10-14 days, empty out the enclosure and clean the cage and all the accessories with hot, soapy water using a scrubbing brush. Rinse and dry thoroughly before filling with fresh substrate. Never use pine-scented products to clean small animal enclosures, since this can cause respiratory problems. Periodically disinfect the cage with a product designed for small animals or a bleach solution, following the guidelines found earlier in this manual. Gerbils

should be placed in a secure “holding” cage or tank while their cage is cleaned. Always wear rubber gloves when cleaning a gerbil’s cage, and wash your hands afterward.

## Common Gerbil Ailments

Provided they’re housed in hygienic conditions, gerbils are usually hardy creatures with few health complaints. Whenever an animal seems unwell, seek veterinary advice. This is especially true if an animal has diarrhea – isolate him immediately, disinfect the enclosure and call the veterinarian.

- ***Tyzzler’s Disease*** – This is a highly contagious disease that can kill within 24 hours of the onset of its symptoms, which include diarrhea or wetness around the anus, listlessness and lack of appetite. Isolate the affected gerbil immediately, and seek veterinary advice. Thoroughly disinfect the cage and all its contents immediately, and every two days thereafter. Once the symptoms are noticed it may be too late to save the animal, and he’s very likely to have passed the disease to the other gerbils in the same enclosure. An outbreak of Tyzzler’s Disease is usually a sign of unsanitary living conditions, and it is generally preventable by good hygiene.
- ***Epilepsy and Seizures*** – usually caused by stress or rough handling, seizures are most common in young gerbils, who often grow out of them. A gerbil that is prone to seizures should be kept in a calm environment and handled carefully. Seizures can also occur if gerbils are fed raisins or grapes.
- ***Tumors*** - Older gerbils sometimes develop odd lumps and bumps which are often benign, but can be cancerous. The most common site for a cancerous tumor is the male’s scent gland, located on the hairless part of its belly. Seek veterinary attention to determine an appropriate course of treatment for your gerbil.
- ***Respiratory Problems and Allergies*** – Improper bedding, the use of harmful disinfectants or the presence of mildew are frequent causes of these ailments. Though cedar and pine based products are notorious for causing respiratory problems, some gerbils have adverse reactions to other beddings as well, which is why paper is the safest material. Mildew is often cause by a leaky water bottle. As is the case with many diseases, keeping a gerbil’s enclosure clean is the best defense against respiratory problems.
- ***Strokes*** – Older gerbils can be prone to strokes, some surviving multiple strokes with few ill effects so long as they are still able to eat and drink. If an animal is found to be paralyzed on one side, keep him warm and comfortable, and keep environmental stress to a minimum.

## Recommended Gerbil Supplies:

- q Enclosure
- q Hamster Gerbil Food Pellets
- q Solid Exercise Wheel
- q Chew Toys
- q Absorbent, Dust-Free Bedding
- q Food Pellets
- q Food Blocks
- q Timothy Hay
- q Metal Tipped Water Bottle
- q Food Bowl
- q Chinchilla Dust
- q Dust Bath Pan
- q Hiding Area With Nesting Material