



## Pet Hamster Facts

- Hamsters are rodents – they belong to the same family as mice and rats. The most common type of pet hamster is the Golden or Syrian Hamster (*Mesocricetus auratus*), which came from Syria in the mid-19th century.
- On average, a Golden Hamster lives for 18-24 months, and as an adult weighs 120 g and is about 15 cm long. Females tend to be larger than males. Hamsters can be long-haired (sometimes called “teddy-bear”) or short-haired, and come in a variety of colours from cream to golden to dark brown.
- Hamsters are naturally nocturnal – they are more active at night.
- In general, hamsters are a low-risk pet when it comes to transmitting disease to people. But it is still important to be aware of the diseases they can carry and how to keep your hamster and you as healthy and happy as possible.



## Getting a Hamster

- Hamsters are often bred in large central facilities and transported from there to various distribution centres and pet stores for sale to the public. Contact with a large number of other animals, and stress during transportation and while in a pet store, can lead to an increased risk of disease in store-bought hamsters.
- When selecting a hamster, it is important to pick one that looks bright and active, with nice clean fur and no signs of diarrhea on its rump, or discharge from the eyes, nose or mouth. If there are other hamsters in the same enclosure, it is important to make sure they all look healthy as well.

## Hamster How-To's

### Feeding

- Pet hamsters should be fed a commercial **pelleted hamster feed** which provides balanced nutrition. Avoid mixed-seed feeds, as a hamster may only eat certain seeds that it likes and burry or hide the rest. Treats such as small pieces of apple, walnuts, raisins and greens should be limited to a maximum of 1/2 teaspoon per day.

### Hamster Homes

- In general, hamsters should be **housed individually**, because if kept together they will often fight.
- Hamsters are notorious escape artists. They must be kept in a **secure enclosure** that will keep them from getting out, and also prevent wild rodents such as mice from getting in.
- Use an enclosure with at least one open side constructed from wire/mesh in order to provide good **ventilation**.
  - The bottom of the hamster cage should be solid, smooth metal or plastic that is **easily cleaned** and disinfected. This should be covered with wood shavings or recycled newspaper for **bedding**. Hamsters also need soft material like facial tissue to **build a nest** for sleeping. Avoid giving them stringy material with long fibres that can become entangled around the animal's feet or teeth.
  - Make sure your hamster is not kept in a cold or drafty area.
  - Hamsters also need things like wood **chew sticks** or some other material to wear down their incisors, and an **exercise wheel** for physical activity.



If your hamster has babies it will require special care both before and after the babies arrive. Be sure to speak to your veterinarian if you think or know your hamster is pregnant.

### Hamster Handling

- Hamsters may bite if startled, awakened abruptly, or handled roughly. Before touching or picking up a hamster, make your presence known (e.g. make a small amount of noise or talk to the hamster) and ensure that it sees you so you do not startle it. Hamsters should only be **handled for short periods** of time because they can easily become stressed, which may lead to an increased tendency to bite.
- A hamster may be safely picked up by cupping it in your hands. It can also be picked up carefully by the loose skin on the back of its neck (called the scruff), or in a small container or box.
- Always watch the hamster very carefully to make sure it does not climb out of your hands or the container it is in, as this could result in the hamster falling and injuring itself or getting loose.



## Hamster Bites

- All hamsters may bite. All bite wounds should immediately be cleaned vigorously with lots of soap and water, and monitored closely for signs of infection. Hamster bites may be small, but they can go deep.
- See a doctor for any bite over a joint, hand, wrist, ankle, prosthesis or implant, or in the genital area, and for any bite to a high-risk individual with a weakened immune system (e.g. HIV/AIDS, transplant and cancer patients).

## Is My Hamster Sick?

- The most common signs of illness in a hamster are likely lethargy and decreased appetite. Other things that may indicate your hamster is sick include:
  - Dull or dirty hair coat, or discharge from the mouth, nose or eyes.
  - A change in the colour or consistency of the stool, or changes in how often you need to clean the bedding.
  - Standing in an abnormal position, or licking or chewing persistently at a particular part of the body.
  - A significant change in behaviour, such as becoming very aggressive



- If you notice any of these signs or if you have any other concerns about your hamster, contact your veterinarian as soon as possible. Veterinary care may seem expensive compared to the cost of a hamster, but it is very important to rule out infectious disease, especially if there is a high-risk person in the house. It is also very important not to let the hamster suffer as it gets more sick. Illness in a hamster may also be due to feeding or housing problems.

## Can My Hamster Make *ME* Sick?

**Yes, but this is quite uncommon.** Nonetheless, the following diseases may on occasion be carried by hamsters and transmitted to humans. Talk to your doctor if you have any concerns about these conditions.

### Dermatophytosis (ringworm):

- ▶ A fungal skin infection caused by one of several species of *Microsporum* or *Trichophyton*. People may develop well-delineated areas of red, raised, itchy skin that are often lighter in the center and therefore appear as a “ring.” The fungi are transmitted by contact with the skin, fur or dander of an infected animal, particularly if the person’s skin is damaged or moist. Signs of dermatophytosis in hamsters can range from none at all, to dry, scaly, circular lesions on the head, limbs, ears and body. This is the most common disease transmitted from rodents to people.

### Lymphocytic Choriomeningitis (LCM):

- ▶ A viral infection that typically causes no clinical signs or mild flu-like disease in otherwise healthy people. The virus is usually carried by mice, but mice can transmit it to hamsters and guinea pigs, which can then transmit the virus to humans in rare cases. In immunocompromised individuals, infection can be very serious, even fatal. Miscarriage or severe birth defects may occur if a woman is infected during pregnancy.

### Rabies:

- ▶ A viral infection of the nervous system which is almost always fatal once clinical signs appear. Transmission occurs when the saliva of an infected animal comes in contact with a wound (such as a bite or scratch) or mucous membrane (e.g. eyes, nose, mouth) Hamsters are usually killed if they are bitten by a rabid animal, but hamsters can survive the bite of a rabid bat and become infected. Only a few cases of rabid hamsters biting humans have been reported, usually outside North America, but more recently a rabid pet hamster was found in Canada.

### Rodentolepiasis and Hymenolepiasis (tapeworms):

- ▶ The dwarf tapeworm of mice (*Rodentolepis nana*) and rat tapeworm (*Hymenolepis diminuta*) can infect hamsters and may infect people as well. People are infected by accidentally swallowing an insect (e.g. flea, beetle) that ate tapeworm eggs from the stool of the infected rodent, or by swallowing the tapeworm eggs directly. People are rarely sick from the infection, and the adult worms may die within several weeks even without specific treatment.

### Salmonellosis:

- ▶ An infection caused by one of many serotypes of *Salmonella*. It typically causes diarrhea, but in some cases it can cause much more serious disease. The bacteria are passed in the stool of an infected animal, which may or may not also show signs of diarrhea. Transmission is by stool contamination of food or water, or contamination of hands followed by transfer to the mouth.

### Tularemia:

- ▶ A bacterial infection caused by *Francisella tularensis*. It is most commonly found in wild animals such as rabbits, hares, and rodents. Infection in people and animals may cause no signs, flu-like signs, or severe diarrhea or pneumonia. The bacteria themselves are highly infectious (it only takes 10-50 bacteria to infect a person). There has been only one report of suspected transmission of *F. tularensis* from a pet hamster to a boy that was bitten by the hamster.



## Infection Control

Although hamsters are generally low-risk in terms of their potential to transmit disease to people, there is always some risk. Therefore a lot of close contact, such as allowing a hamster to sleep in the same bed as a child, should not be permitted. Anyone handling a hamster, especially children, should be taught how to do so correctly and safely.

### Wash Your Hands!

Wash you hands thoroughly with soap and running water after handling a hamster, cleaning a hamster's cage, or coming into contact with hamster bedding, stool or urine. Children should be supervised by an adult to ensure that they also do this properly.



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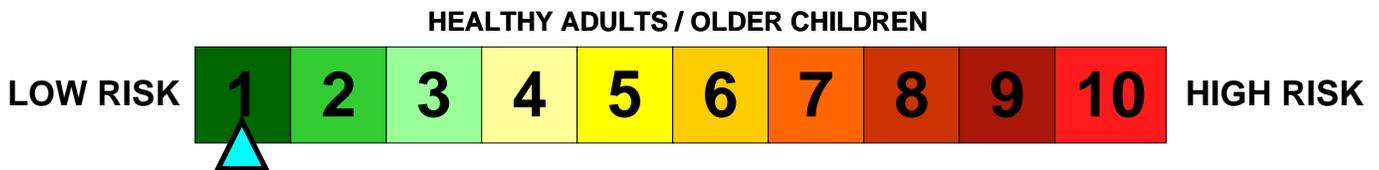
Don't keep a hamster cage in the kitchen or anywhere food is prepared or eaten. Also, don't keep the cage in the bedroom of a young child, an immunocompromised individual or a pregnant woman.

### Keeping It Clean

- A hamster cage should be thoroughly cleaned at least once per week, including removing all of the bedding and disinfecting of the cage itself. Some hamsters need to have their cages cleaned out more frequently than this. Regular cleaning of a hamster's cage can help prevent the spread of pathogens such as lymphocytic choriomeningitis virus and *Salmonella*.
- All old bedding should be removed and the inside of the cage should be scrubbed with soap and water using a stiff-bristled brush to remove any remaining debris/stool that may be stuck to the surface. A hamster will often defecate in the corners of its cage, so pay extra attention to these harder-to-clean areas.
- Once the cage looks clean, a disinfectant, such as concentrated household bleach, should be applied to all surfaces for at least 10 minutes. The cage should then be rinsed thoroughly with water and dried prior to filling it with clean bedding.
- Hands should always be washed thoroughly with soap and water after cleaning the cage.
- Immunocompromised individuals (e.g. HIV/AIDS, transplant or cancer patients) and pregnant women should try to have someone else clean their hamster's cage for them if possible. Otherwise, they should wear rubber gloves while they are cleaning and be particularly diligent about washing their hands as soon as they are finished.

## Zoonotic Disease Risk

For **healthy adults and older children** (over 5 years old), the risk of contracting a disease from a pet hamster is:



**Young children** are at an increased risk of getting infections from a pet hamster, because they often do not wash their hands properly after touching a hamster, and often put their fingers or objects in their mouths. **People who are immunocompromised** (e.g. HIV/AIDS patients, transplant recipients, cancer patients) are also more likely to get sick from pathogens carried by hamsters because their immune systems cannot fight infections as efficiently. **Pregnant women** need to avoid exposure to the LCM virus. The risk of disease transmission can be reduced by:

- Being diligent and thorough about hand washing after handling a hamster or cleaning its cage.
- Keeping the hamster away from food and food preparation areas.
- Knowing how to handle a hamster correctly, and doing so gently and only when necessary, to minimize the risk of bites or scratches.
- Keeping the hamster in good health by caring for it as well as possible.

For these groups, the risk of disease associated with a pet hamster is likely:

