



Gerbil

(Mongolian gerbil, desert rats)

Meriones unguiculatus

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| Adult Size | 6 – 12 inches, including tail | Life Span | 2 – 4 years, shorter if kept singly |
| Male/Female Differences | Sexing gerbils is done by eyeing the distance between the urethra and the anus; the distance is further apart than females. Both are equally handleable. Females may be more defensive while trying to nest or raise its young. | | |
| Compatibility | Gerbils from the same litters are most compatible. Males mix together well. Females may fight to establish dominance as they are more territorial than males. | | |
| Origin | Breeding groups originally exported from Mongolia | | |
| Climate | Home temperature is preferred. | | |
| Day Cycle | Diurnal (awake during the day) | | |
| Temperature | 60 – 75 degrees, avoid extremes. | | |
| Lighting | Low to normal lights are preferred, as bright lights can hurt sensitive eyes. | | |
| Humidity | Drier is better, but adapt to indoor humidity. Avoid extreme humidity, as it can lead to health problems. | | |
| Habitat/Territory | Semi-desert and arid steppes, in burrows. Plastic tubes recreate these in the cage. | | |
| Substrate/Bedding | Provide a safe and soft bedding, the less dusty the better. Cedar bedding can be toxic and pine too dusty. Good litters are shredded or pelleted aspen or recycled paper products. Supply nesting materials and dry hays. | | |
| Hiding Place/Den | Wooden house and coconut huts offer hiding places and the chance to chew. Plastic hamster tubes can be used, but will eventually be | | |

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| | destroyed. |
| Cage Type | Aquariums, plastic cages with tube accessories, or wire. All should be escape proof, ventilated, and easy to clean. Gerbils love to wander at night. Supply the largest cage that's possible. |
| Diet | A few critter cubes and 1-2 tbls of high quality hamster seed mix is given as a staple. Being desert animals, fruits and vegetables may be too rich for their diets and should be offered sparingly. Sunflower seeds are favorites and can be used as rewards (pick out of seed mixes and save for later.) |
| Supplements | Vitamins in water help supply nutrients missing from captive diets. Treat sticks made of seeds and honey are good treats. Yoghurt-covered fruit bits can help maintain intestinal flora. |
| Diet Precautions | Overfeeding and lack of exercise can lead to obesity. Vitamin supplements only need to be offered to unhealthy gerbils or to ones with restricted diets. |
| Feeding | Placing food in a bowl will help prevent over feeding. Gerbils will move most of their food into their nest and bury it for later. |
| Water Source | Water dishes can easily become soiled, so water bottles are preferred. As gerbils can quickly chew most plastic bottles, rounded bottles or metal sleeves will last longer. |
| Grooming | These desert animals are relatively clean, and, when kept in groups, groom each other as part of their social interaction. Offer chinchilla dust for bathing; they use this to remove excess oils from their fur. |
| Oral and Foot Care | The gerbil's teeth continue to grow. Malocclusion can occur when opportunities to gnaw are not offered. Care with wheels needs to be taken, as wire wheels can trap and seriously injure tails and feet; plastic or safety wheels should be used. |
| Proper Handling | Social animals, they love to be handled, and are very curious about people. Care needs to be taken initially as startled gerbils are quick and can jump quite high. Tame gerbils rarely bite unprovoked. Do not pick a gerbil up by its tail. Their tails are fragile and this could cause damage. |
| Habitat Maintenance | Weekly cleaning of the cage is needed, with daily spot cleaning of toilet areas. Being desert animals, they produce little waste and usually eliminate in the same area. |
| Health Concerns | Diarrhea can be a problem. This can be caused by improper diet or dirty cages. Respiratory problems can be due to improper ventilation and dirty bedding. Obesity can be a problem when fed unhealthy, unbalanced diets. |