



Support for adopters

GUIDANCE FOR NEW HAMSTER OWNERS

Taking your new hamster home

You've chosen your new hamster and are raring to take them home, but before you take one step through the front door there are a few things you need to sort out to make sure your home is ready for your new pet.

Moving on

Set up your hamster's cage before collecting them. Hamsters find travelling really stressful so take the cage to the RSPCA and transfer some used but dry familiar bedding from their old cage to the new one to help them feel at ease. If you have a group of hamsters, make sure that they have enough space to escape each other if they want to and remember the familiar bedding - a disruption in the smells of their environment can trigger fighting. Check that the cage is secure, safe and no objects are going to move during transportation that could injure your hamster.

If you can't transport the cage securely, use an appropriately-sized carrier. Cardboard and wooden carriers can easily be chewed; a plastic carrier should prevent any escapees. Again, put familiar bedding into the carrier and don't transport any hamsters together if they aren't familiar with each other. Cover the cage or carrier to keep it dark but ensure that it is still well-ventilated.

Getting to know each other

When you get your new pet home, it is best to leave them for 24 hours so they can get used to their new surroundings, though still provide food and water and check that they aren't showing any signs of illness or injury. The cage should be placed in a quiet area, away from running water, electrical equipment like TV and computers (as the frequencies emitted from this equipment can upset hamsters) and away from other pets. Make sure that your hamster is in a room where the lights get turned off at roughly the same time each night. Your new pet is active at night so it is important that they have a routine. It's not a good idea to put them in a bedroom as they may make a lot of noise when they're awake.

Make sure that they have access to safe hiding places in the cage that they can go to if feeling scared and take things at their pace. Eventually your hamster may enjoy getting out of their cage to explore and exercise under supervision so the room should be hamster-proofed; make sure electrical cables are covered and that there are no hazardous plants in the area where your hamster will be.

Remember your hamster doesn't know you or your lifestyle, so introduce different activities and people over a period of time, particularly supervising any interactions with children.

Home comforts

When your hamster comes home for the first time they will be faced with an environment that is different to where they have just come from. As well as space within their cage to exercise and somewhere to hide, your hamster will need somewhere warm, dry and quiet to sleep - a shelter is ideal. If you have a pair or group of hamsters make sure it's large enough for them all to rest in together. The entrance should be angled to prevent light getting in when they are resting and should have multiple entrances/exits so no hamster gets trapped inside by another hamster.

Safe toys and regular opportunities to play with people and by themselves after the first day or so may also help your hamster settle in. However, be observant. If your hamster's behaviour changes or they show regular signs of stress or fear, talk to your vet.

Food and water

Changing your hamster's diet suddenly can cause an upset tummy; feed your new hamster with the diet they have been used to. Information about your hamster's food and advice on feeding will be provided when you come to collect your pet. If you want to change your pet's diet to something else, do so gradually over about ten days, mixing a little of the new food with the old to gradually wean your hamster onto the new diet. For variety, small quantities of greens, cleaned root vegetables or pieces of fruit such as apples can supplement your pet's ration but introduce these slowly too. Do not give your pet grapes or rhubarb as these can be poisonous to rodents.

Hamsters should be fed their daily ration in two meals per day (unless advised otherwise by a vet) and they must always have access to a bottle of fresh water. Water should ideally be provided in a bottle with a valveless sipper tube; hamsters are not able to apply strong suction and may have difficulty in overcoming the resistance from the water flow in a traditional 'ball-valve' sipper tube. Provided the sipper is of a relatively small diameter, or has been manufactured with a pinch in the segment, they will find it far easier to drink than from one with a mechanical obstruction in it.

Out and about?

Eventually, you may like to give your hamster safe and secure opportunities to exercise and explore outside of their cage. Always supervise any access outside of the cage; using a hamster exercise pen is a great way to provide a secure area; put suitable objects in the area to encourage your hamster to explore.

Exercise balls are not recommended to provide your hamster with exercise as they can actually be stressful for your hamster. Your hamster will not be able to access food, water, places to hide, etc, while they are in an exercise ball.

Good company

If you have adopted a group of hamsters keep an eye on their behaviour particularly as they settle in. Although dwarf hamsters are more sociable than other species of hamster, fighting can still occur. Fighting between cage mates is likely to happen during the night when hamsters are active. Check your hamsters in the morning to make sure that none of them are injured and needing veterinary attention. Check your hamsters regularly to make sure that aggression between the hamsters is not becoming a problem, particularly in the initial time when they are settling in to your home. Ensure they have enough space and resources (e.g. shelters) within their cage to avoid each other if they wish. Do not add group members at a later date. Syrian and Chinese hamsters are very territorial and must be kept alone.

If you have more than one cage of hamsters, they should not be housed directly next to each other as this can cause stress to your pets. This also applies to housing hamsters near other species of rodent; they can be active at different times of day and so disturb each other.

Vet for your pet

Make sure you have someone professional to turn to if your hamster is ill or involved in an accident. Register your hamster at a local veterinary practice before bringing them home. You'll need to give the vet your hamster's medical record as soon as possible; this will be given to you when you collect your hamster.

Health check

Check your hamster's teeth regularly. Rodents have teeth that never stop growing so check your hamster's teeth aren't getting too long as this will be painful. If you think your hamster's teeth are too long, speak to your vet who will be able to trim them and give you advice on preventing it happening again.

Regular grooming is important to keep your hamster's coat in tiptop condition - a soft toothbrush is ideal, particularly if your hamster is long-haired. You need to have patience as your hamster may not be used to being groomed. Reward your hamster and don't shout at them if grooming is difficult at first - this will only make the experience more stressful for your pet.

Getting help

If things aren't going smoothly and you have concerns about your hamster, talk to your vet or contact the RSPCA. There is lots of useful information on the RSPCA website: www.rspca.org.uk/hamsters

It takes time, effort and understanding to help your pet get used to its new life, and to help it overcome problems, but all the time and effort will be worth it when the end result is a happy addition to your family!