

OVERVIEW

The Syrian hamster is a mainstay of the companion animal world. The short-haired or golden hamster is the wild type. That is, the form that most closely resembles the animal (*Mesocricetus auratus*) in nature it has been domesticated from. The golden hamster is native to the dry, hot deserts of Syria. Through generations of selective breeding, fancy short-haired varieties (e.g., panda, black bear) and the popular long-haired (aka teddy bear or angora) hamster have been derived. Satin and rex coats are also bred. The term “teddy bear” is so popular for these large, bear-like hamsters that it is often used to refer to all Syrian hamsters, not just the long-haired varieties many reserve for the name’s use. One fascinating fact about the Syrian hamster is that it has the shortest gestation period of the placental mammals at 16 days. The lifespan of the Syrian hamster is about two years.

HOUSING

Syrian hamsters are solitary animals and must be housed on their own. Cages specifically designed for the tunneling habits of hamsters are abundant in the pet industry. These colorful plastic complexes feature an incredible network of tubes. An aquarium outfitted with a secure metal-framed screen top or a wire cage may also be used. Syrian hamsters don’t usually chew on plastic and PVC tubes and fittings may be used as retreats for these non-tube style cages. Any housing should be as large as possible and filled with a couple inches of processed paper bedding (e.g. CareFRESH®) or aspen shavings. **DO NOT USE PINE OR CEDAR SHAVINGS.** Syrian hamsters need nesting material for their sleeping spots. Shredded paper and torn up paper tissues make excellent hamster nesting material as does hay, although the latter may introduce fur mites. Do not use the cotton wool nesting material sold in pet stores as it sticks in the hamster’s cheek pouches and presents a danger of ingestion and impaction.

FOOD & WATER

Hamsters should be fed a quality “lab block” rodent diet. These diets provide complete nutrition in every bite and wear down the teeth. Seed mixes are nutritionally poor as they allow a chosen favorite seed (often fatty sunflower seeds) to make up the bulk of the diet and should not be used. Bits of broccoli or carrot, or greens like kale or washed dandelion leaves, may be given as occasional treats. Because wild hamsters are omnivorous, eating animal protein in the form of insects, some keepers give small amounts of cat food, cooked chicken, scrambled egg or even mealworms. However, changes in diet are stressful and can cause problems such as the notorious “wet tail” that affects Syrian hamsters. **Do not switch from a lab diet to a seed mix!** Water should be provided via a ball-tip water bottle that is hung in a metal protective holder.

HEALTH

Any discussion of Syrian hamster health focuses on “wet tail”. This serious condition, technically known as proliferative ileitis, presents itself as foul-smelling, mucousy diarrhea, and is fairly common in stressed hamsters. It is highly infectious and often fatal without treatment. It can affect any age Syrian hamster, but is more prevalent at three to six weeks of age. It is most common in the long-haired breeds. The cause is fecal to oral contact with the bacteria *Lawsonia intracellularis*, but this pathogen attacks during stress. The stressors that most often result in wet tail are weaning, transit and relocation (such as transport to the pet store or to the new home), housing in groups, and change of diet. Breeders usually use a lab block diet and switching to an improper seed mix is one stressor that is easily avoided. Dehydration kills wet tail affected hamsters as they often refuse to drink. Oral administration of electrolyte-enhanced water should be undertaken immediately. Fluids injected by a veterinarian may save infected animals. Tetracycline antibiotics may be effective (one quarter teaspoon of Duromycin® or similar chicken antibiotic powder per 16 oz. water bottle), but if the hamster isn’t drinking on its own it won’t receive much medicine. The best prevention for wet tail is to eliminate stress by using the same diet – typically a quality lab block rodent diet – that the breeder used since weaning, and keeping the cage and environment clean by removing soiled bedding from the cage daily and disinfecting the cage weekly. Limit contact and handling for several weeks until the hamster is adjusted and comfortable in its new home. Always house Syrian hamsters alone.

Consult an exotic animal veterinarian for treatment of any pet condition or illness.