

## **Gerbil Needs**

**Housing:** 10 gallon glass aquarium (minimum size, larger is nice if possible)

**Bedding:** Aspen (shredded aspen wood), corncob (granulated corn cobs), CareFresh (recycled paper product). 3 inches is good. Never use shredded pine or cedar; the aromatic oils can cause respiratory infection.

**Lid:** Wire mesh cover is preferable (hinged in middle makes it very convenient to get in and out of)

**Water:** Minimum 4 ounce water bottle. I like the Oasis bottles with metal guard (that keeps the gerbils from chewing the edge of the bottle)

**Food:** About 2 heaping tablespoons a day for a pair: 14-18% protein, 7% fat. If they start getting chubby, then cut back on the fat and protein, not on the amount of food. Examples: Hartz Bonanza Canary Gourmet Diet has 17% protein, 10% fat. I use this for breeders and pups under 16 weeks of age. It is available at Farm Fresh at General Booth and Dam Neck. Katee has a seed mix that is about 15% protein and 8% fat, I believe. Again, I think it is labeled for birds. Available at Luv A Pet near Wal-Mart. Can be put in a small ceramic dish, or scattered on the bedding. They like to forage as well as hoard, so they will bury the dish to prevent other gerbils from finding it (even though they are the only residents.)

**Occasional treats:** kitten chow, almonds, puffed kasha cereal, cheerios, small pieces of fruit (remove any thing left over after 24 hours), rice (raw or cooked), dandelions (only from untreated lawns), dog biscuits (hard kind), sunflower seeds (only from the hand, as these are very high in fat), plain croutons, plain popcorn

**House:** Ceramic or wooden container, cleaned glass bottles (if they start using it as a potty, then you will need to rinse it each day or so just so they don't get it on their fur.)

**Toys:** Empty toilet paper or paper towel tubes, tissue boxes (unscented only), and food grade cardboard (cereal boxes, any box that people food comes in). A running wheel (some gerbils like it, some don't. If you get one, get a solid one, not the wire kind. Gerbil tails are very delicate, and could get amputated. You can get things for them to climb on and dig under, but be aware that their digging may cause things to topple.

**Sanitizer:** Gerbils don't bite as a rule, but if your fingers smell like Cheetos, your gerbil may nibble to see what it is. For this reason, it is best to wash one's hands (or use sanitizer) before handling gerbils. This also prevents the scent from other clans causing your gerbils to think you are an enemy.

**Basic care rules:**

Feed twice a day (1 tablespoon in the morning, 1 in the evening). Check to see if they ate the last serving before giving more, or they will only eat the parts they like, and leave the rest. Always have fresh water available. Change it at least once a week.

When picking up your gerbils, scoop them up from underneath. If you grab them from above, they may mistake you for a hawk (hawks and snakes are their natural enemies). This may make them fearful. Don't squeeze them. Keep your hands mostly open, and just let them wander from hand to hand, up your shirt, etc. A tight grip is only needed to check injuries or to check teeth. If they are putting their ears flat to their head, they don't feel safe.

Gerbils are diurnal. So they both sleep and are awake for parts of the day and night. Typically, they will sleep for about an hour, then play for 2 (adult gerbils, pups sleep more.)

Change their bedding every two –three weeks (let your nose guide you.) If they have made tunnels or a bed in something, they will kick out the soiled bedding when they want it changed.

Gerbils also like to take a dust bath now and then. If your gerbils' coats are looking clumpy or forlorn, get a small covered ceramic container, and put in an inch or two of chinchilla dust (there are ceramic containers made just for this purpose). They will have fun getting in, digging in it and rolling in it. While they do, the dust absorbs any oil in the fur. They will come out looking a bit dusty, but fluffy again.

**Behavior:**

**Thumping:** A gerbil will stand up on its back legs, with its front paws curled, and quickly stamp its feet. It sounds like they are jumping, but it is really stamping their feet alternately. It is done to warn the other gerbils in the colony of danger and also at times of excitement (like during mating).

**Grooming:** Your gerbils will naturally clean each other. They often perform a little dance to decide who gets to groom, and who gets to be groomed.

**Puddling:** Gerbils sleep in a puddle...of gerbils. They will fall asleep in the strangest, most uncomfortable looking positions, typically on top of each other. This is normal and healthy.

**Gerbil aerobics:** Some gerbils use up extra energy by running in a wheel. Some prefer gerbil aerobics. They will find a corner and dig like there is no tomorrow. Sometimes they will dig so hard, they will bring a back foot forward to "help" them dig. They know they aren't getting anywhere. They are just

using up energy. Let them be. This is why I don't recommend acrylic; pretty soon it would be so scratched you wouldn't be able to see them.

**Tricks:** Gerbils can be taught tricks. Basically, when you see a behavior you want them to do, treat them. Positive reinforcement is the only way. If you say the same key word when they do the trick, they will eventually recognize it as a request. Knowing they will get a treat if they do that action, they will often do the trick just from the command. They cannot be hollered into doing a trick. Negative reinforcement doesn't work well. Punishment doesn't work at all. (There is a difference).

**Signs that something is wrong:**

Gerbils can get sick. Unless a specialist recommends to, do not separate the ill gerbil from its tank mate. This will add undue stress on both animals. A common illness is wet tail (from too much fresh fruit or veggies in the diet). This is basically diarrhea and will dehydrate your gerbil very quickly. Discontinue all non-seed food and watch very closely.

Upper Respiratory infection will sound like clicking when you pick the gerbil up. The best treatment is ornacycline (from the bird area of the pet store). ½ tablet crushed and put into 4 ounces of water, changed daily for 10 days straight. All gerbils in the colony should be treated.

If your gerbil doesn't seem his or herself, consult a small animal specialist. Some vets will perform this task, or you can call a local small animal or gerbil-specific rescue agency. Another good resource is your local AGS breeder.