

## PREVENTATIVE HEALTHCARE

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Common health problems in gerbils include:

- **Wet tail.** Symptoms of this bacterial infection include lethargy, diarrhea, loss of appetite, a ruffled coat or wetness around the tail. See a vet immediately if this is the case. This infection can rapidly lead to death.
- **Maloccluded (overgrown) teeth.** If a gerbil's incisors grow too long, they cause pain and prevent the gerbil from eating. See a vet if this is the case. Teeth may need to be filed or clipped.
- **Parasites**, the most common being lice and mites. Symptoms include repeated scratching, hair loss and inflamed skin. See a veterinarian. Treatment may require a topical medication and/or injections.
- **The common cold.** As this illness can be passed from human to gerbil, affected humans should avoid handling gerbils. Symptoms include labored breathing, eye and nostril discharge, lethargy, reduced appetite and sneezing or coughing. See a vet immediately. (These symptoms could also be indicative of a **respiratory infection.**)

Annual veterinary examinations are recommended. Weigh your gerbil weekly to ensure that their weight is stable. Weight loss is a common symptom of serious illness. Visit a vet immediately if your gerbil has any of the following symptoms: reduced appetite, diarrhea, no feces, drooling, bloating, lethargy, difficulty urinating, itchiness or hair loss.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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For more comprehensive information on gerbil care, visit:

- [thesprucepets.com](http://thesprucepets.com)
- [petmd.com](http://petmd.com)
- [rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/rodents/gerbils](http://rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/rodents/gerbils)
- [seavs.com](http://seavs.com)

### Area Vets

Stahl Exotic Animal Veterinary Services  
4015 Rust Rd.  
Fairfax, VA 22030  
(703) 491-1111

Pender Veterinary Clinic  
4001 Legato Rd.  
Fairfax, VA 22033  
(703) 654-3100

Paws, Purrs & Exotics  
5838-A North Kings Highway  
Alexandria, VA 22303  
(703) 549-7297

Was this brochure helpful? Take a quick survey below:

[tinyurl.com/y4s5clm9](http://tinyurl.com/y4s5clm9)

### Animal Welfare League of Arlington

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2650 Arlington Mill Dr.  
Arlington, VA 22206

Phone: 703-931-9241  
[www.awla.org](http://www.awla.org)  
[mail@awla.org](mailto:mail@awla.org)

## CARING FOR GERBILS

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### A BASIC GUIDE TO HUSBANDRY AND PREVENTATIVE HEALTHCARE





## DIET

### Food

- A commercial gerbil pellet or rodent block diet, such as **Oxbow Hamster and Gerbil Diet**, should be available for your gerbil at all times and comprise the majority of the diet. Provide 1/8 cup of pellets per day.
- Fruits (e.g. apple, melon, pear), vegetables (e.g. cucumber, carrot, broccoli), grains, unsweetened cereal and timothy hay or orchard grass can be given as treats. These should not exceed 10% of the diet.
- Boiled eggs and insects (e.g. mealworms and crickets) can be given sparingly as a source of protein.

**Do not feed** gerbils commercial treat sticks, almonds, peanuts, uncooked beans, tomato greens, onions, citrus or unwashed fruits or vegetables. Avoid excessive amounts of sunflower seeds, as they are high in fat.

### Water

- Provide water in a commercially available water bottle. Change water daily.

## HOUSING AND GENERAL CARE

### Caging

- Cages should provide a minimum of 1 by 2 feet of space per gerbil.
- A wire bar cage is optimal, but gerbils can be housed in aquariums as long as they are cleaned multiple times per week.
- Cage floors should be plastic or steel, not wire.

As gerbils are social creatures, they do best when housed in same-sex **bonded pairs**. (See **Handling**.)

### Environment

Gerbil cages should contain:

- An upturned cardboard box, toilet paper roll or commercially available plastic “igloo” for the gerbil to hide in.
- A commercially available running wheel. Vegetable oil or coconut oil can be used to lubricate the wheel’s moving parts.
- Unlimited access to water in a water bottle and pellets in a bowl. Check water bottle daily to ensure that it is functioning and your hamster is drinking.
- Safe materials, such as non-toxic cardboard, untreated wood or commercially available chew toys, to encourage natural chewing behavior and prevent dental disease.

Gerbil cages should not be placed in direct sunlight or in a drafty area. The optimal temperature for gerbil housing is under 80°F.

### Bedding

- Gerbil cages should be lined with 2–3 inches of a paper-based bedding such as Carefresh. Do not use wood shavings or cat litter.
- Bedding should be spot cleaned daily and changed weekly. Wash cage components thoroughly.

Gerbils are natural burrowers. Make sure your gerbil’s bedding is deep enough for it to dig a burrow in its enclosure.

## BEHAVIOR

- Gerbils are generally tame, but are prone to biting and scratching when frightened.
- When excited or stressed, gerbils often pound their back legs on the ground. This behavior is known as “thumping” and can serve as either a warning or a mating call to other gerbils.
- Gerbils make a high-pitched squeak. Young gerbils vocalize frequently, while adult gerbils typically only vocalize when excited or stressed.
- As gerbils are territorial creatures and recognize each other by their scent, they frequently “scent-mark” their territory by rubbing their bellies or feet against the cage.

### Handling

- When picking up a gerbil, support its body with both hands. Never pick a gerbil up by its tail.
- Do not allow small children to handle gerbils without adult supervision.
- When allowing a gerbil to explore outside its cage, be sure to do so in a closed-off area. Keep harmful products and dangerous objects out of reach.
- Introduce new gerbils by placing one gerbil on each side of a divider and switching their places several times a day. If they show no signs of aggression, the divider can be removed. Continue monitoring the gerbils’ behavior to ensure they are not fighting.

